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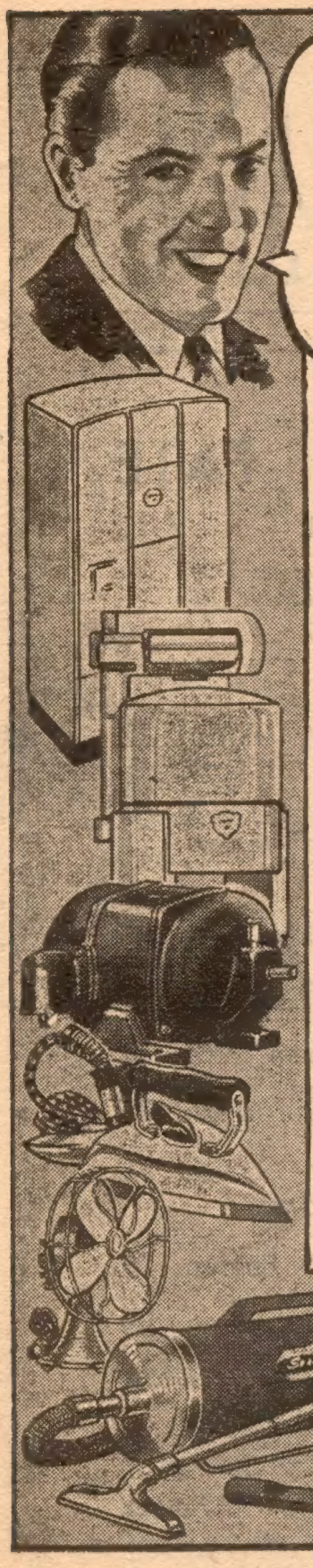

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Accused of double murder, waddy Johnny Frost faces grim gun fury

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Spunky Smith goes on the warpath for gun sharp Fanner Murdock

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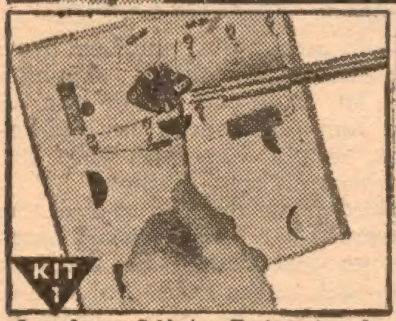

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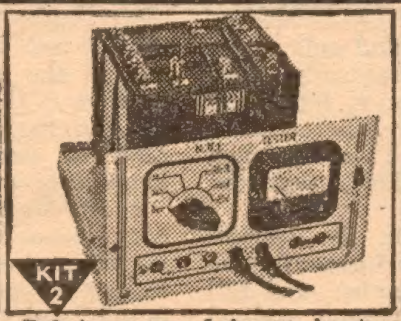

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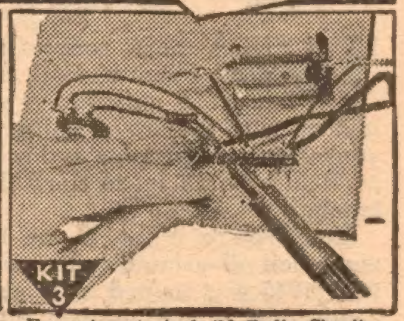

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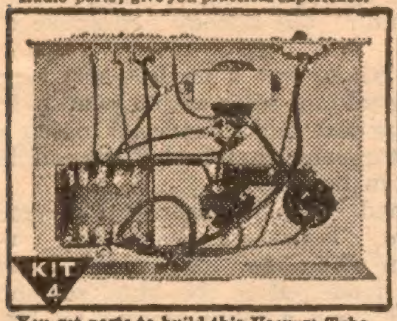

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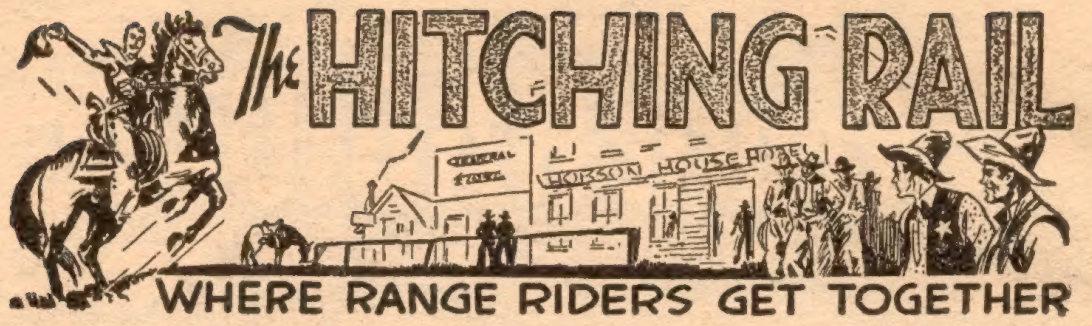

WHOA there, rannies and gals o' the good Hitchin' Rail fraternity! Pull in yore gallopin' broncs, light, and join up with the crowd gathered here. Make yourselves comfortable and roll a smoke, then we'll sure be all set to chew the fat together, betcha!

Yep, you're right about it, the world's champion all-around rodeo performer for the year 1945 was named in December, and Bill Linderman o' Red Lodge, Montana, walked away with top honors. His brother Bud was named runner-up, makin' "Linderman" a family o' champions. Congratulations, Bill and Bud, and more power to you, boys!

You've got to hand it to the winner every time, for it takes a durned lot o' hard ridin', daily practicin', and plenty o' he-man grit and nerve to come out tops in these darin', muscle strainin' rodeo events. Takes skill as well as nerve, and don't you forget it.

Lady Luck

There's sure another element, though, folks, one that enters into most every contest sooner or later. I'm talkin' about that well-known but little-understood lady by the name o' luck. Yessuh, you've all met her, not often enough mebbe, but you've sure seen her at work.

And a rodeo is a gatherin' where lady luck nearly always seems to be a settin' on the fence o' the old corral, or a-ridin' on the shoulder o' some joyous contestant for the day. Luck ain't enough, as everybody knows, but she sure is a help, ain't no denyin'.

I knew an old rannie what was ridin' a bucker on a ranch one sunny Sunday mornin', boys puttin' on a little rodeo o' their own. Lem Ringo was this old rannie's name; hailed from up Montana way. Lem was good at stickin' with a bucker, but the others that was competin' weren't slouches. Some of 'em jest as good as Lem, and he knew it.

They took their turns ridin', and Lem drew one o' the killin'est, sun-fishin', sky-high buckers in the lot. Rule was to ride him till the gun, rakin' him with spurs front and behind the cinch, fannin' him with yore hat, hands free without grabbin' leather.

I was watchin' from the top rail o' the corral fence when I saw this here old long-legged cowboy go straight up in the air. Next instant he was back in the saddle rakin' and fannin' and shoutin' at the top o' his lungs. Course, if the rule had been to disbar a rider what lost his stirrups, Lem would've been out o' the runnin', but nobody had spoke o' that rule.

Well, Lem Ringo was a modest sort of a fellow, and he told me later with a twinkle in his eye that he sure had considered hisself a goner for that instant when he left the saddle and went up in the air.

"That durned old hell-raiser had me for sure," he said. "I was a unseated and undisputed goner when I left that saddle. I was comin' down from out o' the blue, seemed like," he said, "and a tellin' myself I'd lost the top prize money and the ground was gonna be hard. Then, all of a sudden, I felt that old saddle rise up under me, and I lit in it, in a perfect ridin' position, pretty as you please."

Lem shook his head and grinned. "Nothin' in the world saved me from bustin' a hole in the ground but old lady luck," he vowed.

John Ringo

Nope, don't reckon this old Lem Ringo I been tellin' you about was any relation o' John Ringo o' western fame. Reckon you'd call him infamous instead o' famous, though, for John Ringo was a cattle rustler, a robber, a killer, and he made his livin' by means o' his six-guns and cards.

He was a dark, handsome man, given to broodin', a tragic lookin' face at times, livin'

(Continued on page 89)

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By W. C. TUTTLE

When a killing puts the finish to Lonesome Day's romance and a new-found uncle takes over his girl's ranch, it's a signal for some fast gunplay to smash a vile conspiracy!

CHAPTER I

Mysterious Killing

ALTHOUGH Lonesome Day was thirty-five years of age, long and lean, he had never won any prizes for beauty, but the spark of romance burned deep in his soul. He was half-owner of the Cross L, had money in the bank at Cottonwood City—and he had found a suitable ladder behind the HB corral.

Lonesome crouched in the shadows and watched the upper right-hand corner of the HB ranch-house—watching for a light that would tell him that everything was all right. He could almost, but not quite, stand on the patio wall and reach that window, so he had

AN EXCITING RANGE ACTION NOVEL

to find the ladder. It was all fixed. He had two saddled horses out behind the corral, a marriage license in his pocket.

As soon as the coast was clear, Janet had promised to light a lamp in her window. All Lonesome would have to do would be to get over there, place the ladder, climb to the sill and carry away his bride-to-be—along with some necessary baggage.

They would ride to Washout, rout out a minister, have the knot tied and then get on a train. By that time Henry Boone would discover that his daughter was missing—but too late. Janet would leave a note for him. Janet was not quite twenty years of age, pretty, capable—and Lonesome Day was the envy of all the cowpokes in the country.

Lonesome laid awake many nights, trying to figure out just why Janet Boone should want to marry him, but never got the answer. It was just one of those things. Lonesome wasn't a bit vain. He knew himself.

He sat there and shivered, although the temperature was about eighty-five. It had been one hundred and ten that afternoon, but in spite of the heat, Lonesome Day had been covered with goose-pimples all day. In two hours from now Janet Boone would be Mrs. Lonesome Day. In reality, Mrs. Cadwallader Richardson Day. Few people knew his right name—for which he was duly thankful.

Lonesome wanted a smoke, but he was afraid someone might see the light. Old Henry Boone didn't like Lonesome. He told Lonesome that Janet would marry him only over his dead body. He had forbidden Lonesome the HB ranch. Lonesome was stubborn but peaceful. He didn't want to kill Henry Boone. So he and Janet decided that eloping would solve the problem.

Suddenly there was a light in that window. Lonesome drew a deep breath, got slowly to his feet, picked up the ladder and went to the corner against the patio wall. All was serene. He placed the ladder and tested it carefully. He didn't want any accidents. Luckily there was no moon, no shadows.

Quietly he climbed the ladder, until his head and shoulders were above the sill. Then he tapped on the window with his ring. The light dimmed quickly. Then the window went up carefully. Lonesome shoved his head between the looped curtains and said in a low voice:

"All right, sweetheart. Here I am."

WITHOUT any preliminary words or music, a brawny fist hit him squarely between the eyes, and behind it was the power of a mule's kick. Lonesome saw several stars immediately, saw some more on his way down, and a lot more when he hit terra firma.

In ring parlance, Lonesome was knocked stiff. Sometime later, it seemed to him, he was on his feet, trying to listen to what was being said, but not greatly interested. It finally dawned upon him that he was standing against the patio wall, talking with a much enraged Henry Boone, who was excited over something.

"Yuh're a sneak and a thief, comin' in the night to steal," Henry Boone was saying, and in no uncertain terms. "I told yuh to keep away from Janet."

Lonesome steadied himself against the wall. He remembered now.

"How'd you know?" he asked weakly.

"If it's any of yore danged business, I heard Janet tell Mulligan what the plan was. I locked her in another room long enough to take her place. I should have met yuh with the hot end of a shotgun, you long-geared, snake-brained gal stealer!"

Henry Boone overstepped. All this time Lonesome Day had been getting better and better—until he got real good. He had big fists, too—and the kick of a mule.

His right fist, packed with dynamite, hit Henry Boone on the chin, and Henry Boone was lying beside the abandoned ladder, when Lonesome disgustedly walked back to his two horses.

"Locked her up, huh?" grunted Lonesome, as he bumped into a corral post at the corner. "I'll learn him a few things. Well, there goes the marriage—dad-blame it! If that old pelicano—wow!"

A pistol shot blasted the night, and Lonesome Day went into high-gear. He almost ran past the two horses. There was only one shot, but it was enough for Lonesome Day. He swung into his saddle, and headed for Cottonwood City, leading the horse he had brought for Janet. One of his eyes had swollen almost shut, and the other one wasn't too good. He also discovered that you can't fall off a twelve-foot ladder onto hard ground and not get a few sore spots.

Lonesome wanted to tell "Smoky" Hill, the sheriff, and Lonesome's partner in the Cross L, all his troubles. Smoky would understand. But when his left eye went entirely shut, he

Ab Strange went down from a terrific smash on the chin and, as Slim Gleason released Lonesome and tried to dodge back, Smoky's left hook landed hard and Slim sat down on the seat of his pants

decided against it, and headed for the ranch. At least he could suffer alone. No one was there, except Tony Montez, and he'd be asleep. Tony liked to sleep.

After he stabled the horses, Lonesome sat in front of a cracked mirror and took stock of himself. It was mostly on the debit side—what he could see with one half-closed eye.

"I reckon it's war between me and Hank Boone now," he told his twisted image in the mirror. "The idea of him takin' a shot at me! Wasn't satisfied with bustin' up my marriage, bustin' up my eyes and almost bustin' my clavicle. Lonesome Day, yuh're a complete bust!"

So Lonesome went to bed, after taking a sponge-bath in horse liniment. But he wasn't asleep long. Somebody was hammering on the door. Lonesome clawed his way out of bed, lighted the lamp, put on his hat and went to the door. It was rather like a nightmare to Lonesome. Bad eyesight, sore muscles, and a short sleep had caused him to forget the incident at the HB ranch.

In came Smoky Hill, the sheriff, Tommy Miller, Fred Partee, "Slim" Gleason and a new cowpoke from the HB, Ab Strange. With the exception of Smoky, everybody was from the HB spread. Lonesome went back and sat on the edge of the bed.

"I dunno what it's all about—but howdy, anyways," he said.

"You don't know?" queried Slim Gleason.

"Let me do the talkin', Slim," said the sheriff. His face was just a bit white under the heavy tan, and he looked grim.

"What is there to talk about?" asked Lonesome.

"Hank Boone," said Smoky shortly.

"Oh, that ornery pup!" snorted Lonesome. "Look at my face, will yuh? Hit me, without any warnin' and knocked me off a twelve-foot ladder. Yeah, I'd kind of like to talk about him."

"Was that why yuh shot him?" asked Fred Porter.

It was difficult to detect any amazement in Lonesome's eyes, but there was plenty in his voice when he answered.

"Shot him?" he said. "I never shot anybody."

"Let me handle this," said the sheriff. "Lonesome, they found Hank sprawled across a ladder, shot through the heart."

"He never had any—hu-u-u-uh?" snorted Lonesome. "Yuh say he was killed? Lovely dove! Why he must have shot himself, and I thought he was shootin' at me. Can yuh beat that?"

"His gun was in his holster. It hadn't been fired, Lonesome."

LONESOME drew a deep breath and rubbed a hand across his swollen eyes.

"Yuh say he—huh! Smoky, who shot him? I knocked him stiff—but I never shot him."

"You'll shore have to prove that," declared Slim Gleason. "You admit that yuh had a fight with him—and we heard the shot. Then we found him."

"Yea-a-ah," breathed Lonesome. "Yeah, I reckon I will, Slim."

"Exactly what happened out there, Lonesome?" asked the sheriff.

Lonesome told them in detail. It would have been very funny, if it hadn't ended so tragically.

"You knocked Hank Boone out and then high-tailed it, eh?" remarked Slim Gleason. "You'll have a whale of a time convincin' a jury of that."

"Jury, eh? Then I suppose I'm under arrest, eh?"

"I have to arrest yuh, Lonesome," said the sheriff sadly. "Where is yore gun?"

"Over on that dresser," said Lonesome vaguely, and as the men turned to see the sheriff get the weapon, Lonesome drew the gun from under his blankets and deliberately shot out the light.

The room shuddered under the concussion of the heavy cartridge, and, in the darkness, several men went down, clawing for cover. A window was smashed.

"Get outside," somebody yelped. "He went out that window!"

There was a concerted, but ill-timed rush for the door, which opened inward, and it was blocked for several moments.

The sheriff finally got it open, and they spewed outside, running hither and yon, looking for Lonesome Day.

It was dark out there, and not a chance in a million to see anybody twenty feet away. They finally gave up and went back to the house, where a sleepy Tony Montez had showed up. The sheriff lighted the lamp.

"For lands from my sakes, w'at ees wrong, Smooky?" Tony said.

The sheriff explained briefly. Tony shook his head.

"I don't believe heem from stacks on a Bible," declared Tony. "Eef you are askeeng me, Hank Boone ees lying. Lonesomes don'

keel nobody—much."

"Hank Boone is dead, Tony."

"He ees? W'at keel heem—seekness from a longs time, I don't theenk?"

"What's the use?" sighed Slim Gleason.

"That ees right, *amigo mio,*" agreed Tony. "Eef you are died—w'at ees the use?"

"We may as well go back to town," said the sheriff.

They trooped outside and mounted their horses.

"He can't stay away long, Smoky," Slim said. "He's only got on his underwear and his hat."

"That's right—he put on his hat," said Smoky. "Well, he'll prob'ly give himself up tomorrow. Lonesome is no fool."

Tony sat down in the room and rolled a cigarette. From under the bed came a suppressed sneeze.

"Everytheeng else ees gone, Lonesome," Tony said.

Lonesome crawled out and sat on the floor, his back against the bed.

"My, my!" exclaimed Tony. "Somebody poosh on the face ver' hard."

"I am a marked man, Tony," declared Lonesome sadly.

"Sure," agreed Tony. "I go gots some rawed biff for the eye. Een t'ree four day you look like everytheeng else. I feex fine."

CHAPTER II

Jim Boone Arrives

JANET BOONE was dry-eyed as she sat in the sheriff's office next morning. With her were John Knowles, attorney for the HB, and Harry Kane, the county prosecutor. They all knew how Lonesome Day had eluded the law. Janet said she was glad. She wasn't very big, and her blue eyes fairly snapped as she said that Lonesome didn't kill her father.

"My dear, you must be reasonable," said the prosecutor. "I realize that Mr. Day is not a belligerent, dangerous person. But under the circumstances and in the heat of anger, anything might happen. He admits striking your father, you know."

"And my father struck him," retorted Janet. "My father took advantage of me, and when I went into his bedroom to get a book for him, he turned the key in the lock. He took my place in the room, knocked Lonesome off the ladder, and then went down to beat him up some more."

"He overheard you telling the cook what you were going to do," said John Knowles, a pompous, little man, with a rooster-comb of white hair.

"I had to tell Mulligan," admitted Janet. "He is as loyal as any one on earth—and we needed that ladder."

"The only thing we can do is place a murder charge against Lonesome Day," said the prosecutor. "If he is innocent, let him prove it."

"I thought the law had to prove him guilty," said Janet quickly.

"Yes, yes, that is true, my dear. I suppose you will bend every effort to apprehend Lonesome, Sheriff. People are saying—"

"We won't go any further in that matter," interrupted Smoky. "I'm the sheriff, even if Lonesome is my ranch pardner. I can't imagine my pardner killin' a helpless man—but I'll arrest him, if I can."

"If you can?" queried the prosecutor.

"Lonesome knows every inch of the hills, and he's a dead shot."

"If he was inocent—" suggested Knowles.

"The cards," said Smoky, "are stacked against him—and you know it."

"Well, dear me! I didn't stack them, Smoky."

"Regarding this letter which was found in Henry Boone's pocket," remarked the prosecutor, "it would seem—"

"No one showed me any letter," interrupted Smoky. "What letter?"

"We were going to show it to you, Sheriff," said Knowles, and drew it from his pocket. "Did you ever hear Henry Boone speak of a brother?"

"No," replied Smoky. "No reason for him to tell me, I suppose."

"I never knew he had a brother," said Janet.

It wasn't a very long letter, written with a pen, and postmarked Devil's Gate, Montana. The letter informed Henry Boone that he—the writer—was coming soon to make him a visit. He apologized for not writing for years and said:

Henry, I'll always be in debt to you for what you done for me years ago. I'll never forget it, and hope some day to make it up to you. We will talk this all over when I see you, which will be soon. I ain't never made much money, like you probably have, but I get along. I have something I ought to have sent you years ago,

but I'll bring it along and you can keep it or destroy it.

The letter was signed Jim Boone. Smoky handed it back to the lawyer, without any comment.

"There must have been some secret between them," the prosecutor said dryly.

"I don't know," Janet sighed. "He never mentioned a brother to me."

"Unfortunately, Henry Boone died intestate," sighed Knowles.

"What was that?" asked Smoky.

"I mean, Sheriff, he didn't leave a will."

"Oh! Well, naturally Janet would get the HB."

"Naturally—until this brother came into being."

"The HB is worth a lot of money," said the prosecutor. "In fact, Henry Boone was the richest cowman in this country. The land holdings alone total over twenty-five thousand acres."

"I am not interested in the HB," said Janet. "I want the law to let Lonesome alone."

"All he had on, when he went out that window, was his underclothes and his hat," Smoky Hill said soberly.

Janet tried to look serious, but the mental picture was too much. She hid her head in her hands. Knowles cleared his throat harshly and fussed with his cuffs, as Smoky added:

"And that union suit kinda bagged, too."

"A hat and a suit of underclothes," said the prosecutor.

"Lonesome always put on his hat, first thing when he got up."

Janet looked up, her eyes filled with tears.

"There, there, my dear!" Knowles said. "Just be calm."

JANET got up and walked out.

"It has been a terrible shock to her. So young," Knowles said.

"Yuh mean—Lonesome's habit of puttin' on his hat first?" Smoky asked.

"Ridiculous!" snorted Knowles, and went out, too.

Harry Kane, the prosecutor, chuckled deep in his generous-sized paunch.

"Do your best, Smoky," he said, and went out after them.

After a little while Slim Gleason and Ab Strange came in. Slim was a lean, hawk-faced cowboy, who had been with the HB about a year. Strange was a newcomer, and Smoky didn't like his looks. He was big, hard-jawed, cold-eyed, about forty years of age, and wore his holster tied down low. Smoky had never cared for Slim Gleason either.

"Heard anythin' about Lonesome?" asked Slim.

"No," relied Smoky. "I haven't been out to the ranch today—yet."

"Yuh don't seem so much interested in gettin' Lonesome."

Smoky's eyes narrowed. "I'll handle the deal in my own way, if yuh don't mind, Slim," he replied. "After all, I'm runnin' this office."

"Yeah, that's right," agreed Slim. "Still—him bein' yore pardner—"

"We just kind of wondered," said Strange. "what we're supposed to do, in case we run into Lonesome Day in the hills—kind of ridin' —yuh know."

"My advice would be to duck," replied Smoky soberly.

Slim laughed shortly. "He ain't so tough. What Ab wants to know. Do we try to take him?"

Smoky nodded. "Yuh might, but I wouldn't advise it. Any time I want you fellers to put yourselves out thataway, I'll deputize yuh. In that event the county will have to pay yore burial expenses."

"Listen!" snorted Strange. "If yo're tryin' to be funny—"

"I ain't!" snapped Smoky. "You boys just run along and help take care of the HB dogies—and don't worry about Lonesome Day. He's like a rattler—he won't hurt yuh if yuh leave him alone."

"Well, if yuh don't want our help, yuh don't have to take it," said Slim.

"That's an awful nice feelin', Slim. Come in again sometime."

"There's an election next Fall," said Slim meaningly.

"And after that comes Christmas," added Smoky. "I'll try and send yuh a card."

After they were gone Smoky kicked the brand register off his desk, picked up his hat and went back to his stable. Election next Fall!

He saddled his horse, swung into the saddle and headed for the Cross L. At least, Tony Montez wouldn't offer him any advice.

Smoky was young for a sheriff, being only twenty-eight. He was an even six feet tall, weighed a hundred and seventy, and knew a lot more about cows than he did about law. He also had no intention of arresting Lone-

some Day—at least, not for a while. He knew Lonesome better than anyone else on earth, and he was dead certain that Lonesome had not murdered Henry Boone. Who did? That was a question which he must solve, if possible.

Henry Boone had been an overbearing person, trying to dominate everybody, but as far as Smoky knew he had no mortal enemies. He had never injured any one, so far as Smoky knew. But someone must have hated him enough to kill him in cold blood. Why?

Smoky shrugged off the puzzling question, and rode straight for the Cross L.

Tony Montez was sitting in the shade of the porch at the ranchhouse. It was Tony's favorite occupation—and spot. He watched Smoky dismount and come up to the porch.

The little Mexican vaquero grinned. "How am I, you hope?"

Smoky sat down and rolled a cigarette. Tony accepted the tobacco and papers.

"How's Lonesome?" asked Smoky.

"Lonesome?" Tony halted the rolled cigarette at his lips. "*Por Dios,* how I know those, Smooky? Lonesome ees dangerous creeminals."

"Yeah, I know. Where was he last night—under the bed?"

"How you know? You come back and peek?"

"No." Smoky was smiling. "All that went through the window was a chair—and I fell over that out here."

"H-m-m-m-m," said Tony soberly. "Eeef you catch heem, you mus' arres' heem?"

"If I catch him—yeah. All I want is to talk with him."

"You cross my heart, I hope you died, Smooky?"

"That's right, Tony. I promise."

TONY turned his head and called to Lonesome, who came shuffling out, a grin on his unshaven face.

"A fine character you turned out to be," said Smoky. "Can't even get married. How are yuh, feller?"

"I'm stiffer'n a lodge-pole," replied Lonesome. "Tony loaded me up with raw beef, and the eyes are pretty good. When are they aimin' on lynchin' me, Smoky?"

"Mebbe next week. Inquest tomorrow, I reckon. I didn't ask Doc Campbell, but I guess that's the day. Slim Gleason and that new cowpoke, Ab Strange, was all concerned on what they was to do in case they ran into you in the hills. I told 'em to duck."

"What are they aimin' to do—collect my scalp?"

"Yeah, I reckon so. Thought you ought to know. When they searched Hank Boone's pockets last night they found a letter he'd received from his brother, Jim Boone."

"Brother? I didn't know he had a brother."

"Neither did Janet."

"Smoky, have yuh seen her today?" asked Lonesome eagerly.

"Yeah, she was in the office with John Knowles and Harry Kane."

"Them two law-buzzards! What'd she say? Anythin' about me, Smoky?"

"Oh, we discussed yuh—some. Janet got all broken up. Cried in her handkerchief."

"Shucks! Well, after all, he was her father. She prob'ly won't ever speak to me again. I feel awful about it. I'm even sorry I hit him—or am I? Gosh, he shore socked me awful hard. Made me mad."

"Yeah—it looks thataway," sighed Smoky.

"Listen to me, Smoky! Do you think I shot him?"

[*Turn page*]

"If I did, you'd be in jail right now."

"Thank yuh. But what about this Jim Boone. Where-at is he?"

Smoky explained what was in the letter, and Lonesome listened with knitted brows.

"How will this affect Janet gettin' the HB spread and Hank's money?" he said finally.

"That's up to the law—and lawyers, Lonesome. All I've got to do is find out who killed Hank Boone. Do you know anybody who hated him?"

"I did," replied Lonesome honestly. "I still do."

"You don't count. And you can't hide out forever. Somebody will get yuh. We'll have the inquest, find yuh guilty enough to try for murder, and then they'll offer a reward for yuh, dead or alive."

"You paint a beautiful future for me, Smoky?"

"I know it. Lonesome, you better hide awful good, 'cause that evidence would hang a saint in the Cottonwood country. I'm goin' back now. If yuh stay around here, yuh better keep Tony posted for a lookout. Some of that HB outfit will prob'ly be prowlin'."

"I'll be lookin', pardner. *Mucho gracias, amigo. Hasta luego.*"

* * * * *

While the inquest drew a big crowd of people, there was no startling testimony. Slim Gleason testified that he and Ab Strange were the only cowboys at the ranch that night, Partee and Miller being in town. They knew nothing, of course, about the elopement plans of Janet and Lonesome Day. They heard the one shot fired, investigated and found Henry Boone, lying across a ladder at the corner of the house, dead.

Mulligan, the cook, was asleep in his room, and Janet was inside her father's room, the door locked from the outside. Slim testified that he immediately saddled a horse and came to notify the sheriff. Janet had told Slim and Ab that she and Lonesome had planned the elopement, but her father had locked her in his room.

Janet wasn't at the inquest. The doctor testified as to the condition of Henry Boone's body—a bruised chin—a bullet through his heart, fired at close range. Smoky Hill was questioned regarding Lonesome's admissions at the ranch-house, his condition, and how he escaped arrest.

The case was turned over to the six-man jury, which immediately asked that Lonesome Day be apprehended and held on a charge of murder. As far as that jury was concerned, Lonesome Day was guilty of murdering a helpless man, and they wanted an eye for an eye.

They buried Henry Boone next afternoon in the heat scourged cemetery on the slope of a hill above Cottonwood City, and two hours later Jim Boone came in on the stage from Washout.

Jim Boone was a big man, slightly gray, hard-eyed, plainly dressed. He seemed overcome with grief, having learned from the stage driver that his brother had been killed. He wanted to know all the details, and Smoky Hill told him what he knew.

AN EXPRESSION of grief came over Jim Boone's gaunt face.

"Poor Henry, poor Henry," he sighed. "A fine man—one of the best. It's mighty hard to bear."

"We all feel bad," said Smoky.

"I know you do. You have lost a fine citizen. Well, I must find a way to get out to the ranch. Janet will need me. Why, I haven't seen her since she was a baby."

"Yeah, she's prob'ly honin' for yuh," agreed Smoky dryly. "Prob'ly settin' on the front gate, strainin' her eyes for a first sight of yuh."

"But she doesn't know I'm comin'. I only wrote to Henry."

"He had the letter in his pocket and we read it—after his death."

"Oh, I see. Well, thank you, Sheriff. I shall get a rig at the livery-stable. See you later."

Smoky leaned against the side of his doorway and watched Jim Boone go over to the livery-stable.

"Overcome with grief—and he ain't heard from Henry for years," said Smoky to himself. "Well, it takes all kinds of folks to make up a world, I reckon. Janet needs him! I'll betcha right now that old pelicano is countin' the worth of the HB. Pretty soft for Jimmie."

Janet didn't exactly welcome Uncle Jim with open arms. In fact, she merely shook hands with him, and said she was glad to see him. He was very solicitous about her health, told her she was a mighty pretty girl, and wanted to know what she was planning to do about the HB.

"Of course, you can't run it alone," he assured her. "Perhaps it is a good thing I came when I did."

"I believe I can run it to my own satisfaction," she told him.

CHAPTER III

Janet Gets a Shock

LATER that day Jim Boone met all the boys at supper and told them confidentially that he would probably run the ranch, but no arrangements had been made.

All that evening he tried to impress Janet with his responsibility to her departed father. He simply was duty bound to step in and take Henry's place, in her affections and operation of the ranch.

Janet had little to say, but did a lot of hard thinking. Next morning he continued the conversation, but Janet saddled her horse and rode away to escape him. She had been gone only a short time, when John Knowles, the lawyer, arrived at the ranch. He had heard that Jim Boone had arrived, and wanted to have a talk with him. Jim Boone was ready to talk but wanted to do most of it himself.

They sat down on the shaded porch and gradually talked up to the inheritance of the ranch. Knowles admitted that Henry Boone left no will.

"Of course, Mr. Boone, we did not know Henry had a brother," he said. "We supposed that Janet was the only heir to the HB. Just what do you intend to do about it?"

"Bluntly," replied Jim Boone, "I want the whole ranch."

"Bluntly," said the lawyer, "you won't get it."

Jim Boone smiled slowly. "We understand each other, Mr. Knowles. You are lookin' after Janet's interests and I'm lookin' after mine. You are, I believe, a smart lawyer. But I have an ace-in-the-hole, which I don't want to turn over, until I have to. I wouldn't hurt Janet for the world, but I suppose I shall have to, eventually."

"An ace-in-the-hole, Mr. Boone?"

"Yes—the biggest in the deck. You play poker, Mr. Knowles? Then you will appreciate it when I say that this is not only an ace-in-the-hole but it is a *wild* card, as well. Before I came here, I had no idea what this HB amounted to. In fact, I merely came to visit Henry. I knew he was in the cattle business, but didn't know the extent. Yes, I think I will enjoy being a cattle baron, Mr. Knowles."

"Will you please explain this allusion to something that will give the HB spread to you, Mr. Boone?" asked the lawyer. "Naturally, I would like to know."

"I'm sorry, but this is not the time, Mr. Knowles. Suppose we hold this in abeyance, as the lawyers say. No hurry. Sooner or later this matter of inheritance will come up. Plenty of time then. In the meantime, I will assist Janet in operating the ranch. She needs me."

John Knowles got up and put on his hat.

"You understand, Mr. Boone," he said coldly, "I shall have to tell Janet of our conversation. After all, she is my client."

"If you want to hurry her, go ahead, Knowles."

"This whole thing sounds silly," declared the lawyer. "This estate is worth a fortune, Mr. Boone. Janet is the daughter of the man who owned it, lock, stock and barrel. Just because you happen to be the brother of Henry Boone, how on earth can you have the unlimited gall to step in here and claim everything?"

"Priority rights, I believe you would call it, Mr. Knowles." Jim Boone was smiling now. "In due time I shall present my papers. Until then, let us be friends. After all, I shall need the services of a lawyer—when I take over the HB."

John Knowles went away, shaking his head, wondering what this man had in mind. Evidently there was something between the two brothers which no one else knew.

Janet Boone was not exactly a discreet sort of person. Her mother had died when she was only two years old, and she had grown up more like a boy than a girl. She had no definite destination in mind, when she saddled her horse that morning, but she ended up at the Cross L ranchhouse, after finding out that Smoky Hill was not at his office.

Smoky and Tony were at the ranch. Tony saw her and went out on the porch.

"Is Lonesome here, Tony?" she asked.

"Lonesome?" Tony scowled thoughtfully. "Oh, *senorita,* you mean those beeg criminals?"

"Don't be funny, Tony."

"Janita, I geeve me your word, I am never fonny—I hope nots."

Smoky came to the doorway and grinned at Janet.

"You hadn't ort to come out here," he said severely, wiping away the smile. "What will people say?"

"Never mind the people. I had to get away

from my uncle."

"Oh—Jim Boone? Why—uh—what's wrong with him, Janet?"

"If yuh ask me, it's his face, figure and his conversation," she replied in a cowboy drawl. "When I want somebody to boss me, I'll hire 'em or—well, I might marry 'em. The only sensible thing he has said since he came to the ranch is that I've changed. He hadn't seen me since I was two or three years old. Where's Lonesome Day, Smoky?"

SMOKY shook his head.

"*Quien sabe?*" he replied soberly. "Maybe here, maybe there. After all, Janet, the coroner's jury found him guilty. I'm supposed to get him, but I don't know where to look. You don't mean that you still care for that high-pocket badman, do yuh?"

"If I don't, I want to be the first to tell him," replied Janet.

"Yeah, I reckon yuh would. C'mon in and set, woman."

They went into the main room of the little ranchhouse. Tony grinned and went outside, where he smoked innumerable brown-paper cigarettes, and kept an eye on the road to Cottonwood City. Janet smiled. She knew that Lonesome Day wasn't far away from the ranch, and that Smoky was not making any effort to apprehend him.

"The first thing you know, Smoky," she said severely, "the commissioners will be demanding your resignation as sheriff."

"I don't believe they will," he said soberly. "In fact, I know they won't, Janet."

"How can you be so sure, Smoky?"

"'Cause I done resigned this mornin'."

"No! Smoky, do you mean—you quit? You did this for Lonesome?"

"Lonesome is my pardner," said Smoky quietly, "I swore to uphold the law. I can't do it in this case, Janet. As sheriff of this county, I can't help him none to prove he didn't do it, so I quit. After all, if they get Lonesome, somebody has got to run the ranch."

"You and Lonesome have been friends for years, Smoky."

"Yeah." Smoky sighed. "I believe I traded him out of his first rattle."

Tony had dropped off the porch and came around to the back doorway. They heard him come through the kitchen.

"Copple cowpoke ees come on the road ver' slow," he said quietly. "I theenk maybe he snick een on us, from the way he act. Color from the two horse say he ees from the HB."

"Sit down, Tony," said Smoky. "Let 'em come in. We're here first."

"Why would any of our men come out here?" asked Janet.

Smoky shrugged his shoulders and began rolling a cigarette. It was quite a while after Tony came in when they heard a quick step on the front porch. The door was open, and they looked to see Slim Gleason, backed up by Ab Strange. Each man had a gun in his right hand. No one spoke. They came in cautiously, halting just inside the doorway.

"Well?" queried Smoky. "What's on yore minds—if you have any?"

Slim smiled grimly. "Funny, eh? You do the laughin', Smoky?"

"Slim, what are you doing here?" asked Janet sharply.

"Lookin' for the same man you are," he replied sarcastically.

"Wait a minute, Janet," said Smoky. "Where'd you get that star, Slim?"

"Oh, yuh noticed it, eh? Well, if yuh want to know so badly, I'll tell yuh. Two hours ago I was appointed sheriff, and I'm lookin' for Lonesome Day."

"All I can say is that the commissioners were awful hard up for material, when they picked you, Slim," remarked Smoky.

"You can keep yore ideas to yourself, Smoky. I'm runnin' the office, and you can tie to that, my friend."

"So you quit the HB," said Janet. "I'm rather glad, because it saves me the trouble of firing you. As for you, Strange, I'll see that you get your pay this evening."

"Think so, sister?" grinned Strange. "Well, for yore own information, I've been made foreman of the HB, takin' charge today."

"Who gave you that job?" asked Janet in surprise.

"Jim Boone, yore uncle. He's runnin' the HB—he says."

"You're still fired, Strange," she said definitely. "He has nothing to do with the HB. He may be my father's uncle, but he won't even be living on the HB after today. And you can go back there and tell him if you want to."

"His word is good enough for me," grinned Strange. "I'm foreman."

Janet drew a deep breath and looked at Smoky. He shook his head.

"We're wastin' time," said Slim Gleason. "We're goin' to search the ranch, Smoky,

'cause it's dollars to doughnuts that Lonesome Day is right here."

"That's all right," said Smoky. "But first I want to see yore search warrant."

"Search warrant?" parroted Slim. "I don't know what yuh mean."

"Then you better go back and ask the judge or any lawyer. You can't enter and search a place without one. Start movin'. Don't forget that yuh came in here with drawn guns and yuh're goin' out with yore tails between yore legs."

"Yeah?" queried Slim dubiously. "Well, I thought—"

"Don't try it," interrupted Smoky. "Just ask somebody who knows."

THE new sheriff's jaw dropped.

"Do you mean I can't search this place for Lonesome Day?"

"Go ask the judge. Have yuh got a warrant for Lonesome?"

"Warrant? I'm the sheriff. I don't need none."

"You better have one, Slim."

"Yeah, I believe that's right," said Strange. "I've heard of 'em."

"All right," agreed Slim. "If I need one, I'll get one. But I'll be back."

"That's yore business, Slim. *Adios, mofeta.*"

Slim walked out, with Strange at his heels. They walked down past the stable, where they had left their two horses. Janet went to the doorway with Smoky, and they watched the two men disappear around the big stable.

"Smoky, I'm going back to the ranch and have this out with Uncle Jim," Janet said. "I've never heard of such nerve in my life."

"I'll ride back to Cottonwood City with yuh, Janet, unless yuh want me to go to the ranch with yuh."

"Thank you, Smoky, but I'll handle it myself."

They got on their horses and were riding through the big gateway, when Slim and Strange came hurrying around the stable. They drew up the horses.

"Where's our horses?" Slim yelled at them.

Smoky looked at Janet, squinted back at the two men.

"Why worry about horses," he said. "It's only twelve miles."

They rode on, while Slim and Strange still stood there beside the stable. Judging from their actions, they were very profane. They started toward the ranchhouse, but the front door shut quietly, and the bar fell in place behind it. Tony Montez didn't want to argue with them.

Slim hammered on the door, but no one came.

"I'd shoot the jasper who stole my horse!" Strange said.

"Tony!" yelled Slim. "Tony, you dirty, little Mexican, where are our horses? Come out of there and find our horses!"

"Leesten!" came Tony's voice inside the house. "You hear Smooky tell you that you mus' have one searches warrant for find Lonesome?"

"Yeah, I heard him," snapped Slim. "What about it?"

"Gots two," replied Tony. "Maybe you find horses."

"I'll cut yore dirty ears off," swore Slim, but Tony had no more comments.

"Well, I reckon we're walkin' back, Slim," said Strange. "That Mex never took our horses. He never left the house."

"Lonesome Day!" snorted Slim. "That's who took 'em! Why, I'd like to get my hands on him. If I ever do—"

"You better mak' weesh that you don't," said Tony through the door.

"C'mon," said Slim. "No use arguin' with a Mexican."

As they headed for the gate, facing a twelve-mile walk, Slim shook his head.

"Ab, you know some Mexican, didn'tcha?" he asked.

"Yeah, I talk it a little."

"Uh-huh. What does *mofeta* mean?"

"Skunk," replied Strange.

"It does, eh? Huh! I'll get even with Smoky for that. . . ."

Jim Boone was at the corral, talking with Tommy Miller and Fred Partee, when Janet came back to the ranch. One of the boys took her horse, and her uncle joined her near the house. Janet was both mad and puzzled. She asked him what on earth he meant by making Ab Strange foreman of the ranch.

"Well, why not?" smiled Jim Boone. "Strange is a capable man."

Janet looked curiously at him.

"Uncle Jim, did anybody ever tell you that you must be crazy?" she said.

"No, I don't believe they ever have, my dear."

"You must be," she declared. "No sane person would step in, without any authority, and take charge of some business that doesn't belong to them. As a matter of fact, I fired

Strange today—and he stays fired."

Jim Boone smiled patronizingly and shook his head.

"Sorry, my dear, but Strange is the foreman," he said. "I hired him—and he stays hired. The HB ranch belonged to my brother. I am his nearest relative, so the law will give it to me. You haven't a thing to say."

"You better get this straight," blazed Janet. "Henry Boone was my father."

"I suppose you better know the truth," he said coldly. "You have made a slight error in relationship. Henry Boone was yore uncle. I am yore father."

JANET stepped back, wide-eyed, the color draining from her face.

"You!" she choked. "No! You're lying!"

"I have the proof," he said quietly. "Your birth certificate. Your mother died when you were born, and Henry's wife agreed to take you. They had no children. Only the three of us knew. The name was the same. I realize it is a shock to you, but you had to know. There never was a legal adoption, of course. You better sit down and think it over, my dear. And from now on, please don't interfere with my orders."

Jim Boone turned and went back to the corral. Janet managed to reach the porch steps, where she sat down. Mulligan, the old Chinese cook, who had been with the HB for twelve years, came out to her.

"Missie, yo' sick?" he asked. "New boss no good. Too much boss."

"I'm all right, Mulligan," she said hoarsely, and got to her feet.

"Yo' hire him?" queried Mulligan.

"No, Mulligan," she replied wearily. "I seem to have inherited him."

Smoky Hill met Harry Kane, the prosecutor, on the street. Kane was not too happy over the appointment of Slim Gleason—and was sorry that Smoky had resigned. Smoky told him what happened at the Cross L, and the lawyer laughed heartily.

"A good start for a new sheriff," he chuckled. "But what are you going to do, Smoky?"

"Run the Cross L. I'm a cowpoke, not a sheriff, Harry."

"You've been a blamed good sheriff. I realize that you don't want to arrest Lonesome Day, but is it worth giving up a good job to keep from doing something that will certainly have to be done, even if you don't do it."

"Let somebody else do it," said Smoky. "As a sheriff I can't help Lonesome. Harry, I don't believe Lonesome is guilty, but he hasn't a chance in court. You know that."

"Not a chance on earth, Smoky. I wouldn't even have to prosecute."

CHAPTER IV

Brutal Arrest

SMOKY wanted to know more about Jim Boone, so he sent a telegram to the postmaster at Devil's Gate, Montana, asking for all the information possible.

Jim Boone came to Cottonwood City that evening and had a long conference with John Knowles at the lawyer's office. Smoky ran into Jim Boone and Tommy Miller in the general store, after the meeting. Tommy was a young cowpoke, very friendly to Smoky and Lonesome. While Boone was making some purchases Tommy gave Smoky some information.

"I dunno what's goin' on at the ranch, Smoky, but Jim Boone has taken entire charge," he said. "He made Ab Strange foreman, and Ab's only been there a week, while the rest of us have been there a long time. Jim Boone ain't knowed Strange long enough to know whether Strange is a cowman or not."

"That's a funny deal," mused Smoky. "What does Janet say?"

"I ain't seen her. Mulligan said she looked sick. Jim Boone had a long talk with Knowles this evenin'. What do yuh think of them makin' that knot-headed Slim Gleason sheriff, Smoky?"

Smoky told him what happened at the Cross L, and Tommy choked with unholy mirth. "And Slim hates walkin' worse'n anybody on earth."

Jim Boone came back, carrying some small packages.

"Sorry to know you resigned, Hill," he said.

"That's all right, Mr. Boone. I'd rather work with cows. Did you have a ranch in Montana?"

"Yes, I had a small spread, but I disposed of it. I didn't have the capital to expand, so I gave it up."

"I knew a fellow who went up to Montana a few years ago. Seems to me he went up around Devil's Gate. His name was Thomp-

son—Jim Thompson."

"Jim Thompson? No, I never knew anybody by that name in Devil's Gate."

"You'd know most everybody in the place, I reckon."

"Oh, yes. It isn't a very big place. I had an interest in a store there for quite a time. Run out to the HB and see us once in a while."

"Thank yuh, Mr. Boone. I'd be glad to do it."

After they left, Smoky went over to John Knowles' office. The elderly lawyer welcomed Smoky gravely, and said he was sorry to know that he had resigned as sheriff.

"Maybe a lawyer can't answer questions, John, but what's goin' on at the HB?" Smoky asked. "Is Jim Boone runnin' things out there?"

The lawyer's tips tightened for a moment. "He is, Smoky."

"Well—uh—what's it all about? After all Janet—or has she hired her uncle to run it for her?"

"She has not, Smoky!"

"Yuh're runnin' kinda short of words, ain't yuh, John?"

"I am almost entirely out of words, young man," replied Knowles severely. "I have been Henry Boone's attorney for ten years. He was a peculiar man, but he had his good points. Jim Boone is a peculiar man, and I don't believe he has one good point."

"But Jim Boone don't own the HB, John."

"Don't he? Smoky, I got the shock of my life a while ago. Jim Boone was married, and his wife died when their girl was born. Jim Boone, a drifter, had no place for the baby, so Henry Boone and his wife took her, not a legal adoption, of course. Figure that out yourself, Smoky."

"You mean that Jim Boone is Janet's father?" gasped Smoky.

Knowles nodded grimly. "That's right, Smoky. Jim Boone has Janet's birth certificate. Henry Boone was only her uncle. Jim Boone will get the HB—not Janet."

"Well, did yuh ever see such hair on a dog?" said Smoky. "Yuh know, Ab Strange told Janet out at my ranch that Jim Boone had hired him as foreman of the HB, and Janet fired him right there. Does Janet know about this?"

Knowles nodded. "Jim Boone has told her. I guess it was a shock."

"Yea-a-ah!" breathed Smoky. "John, why on earth did the commissioners appoint Slim Gleason sheriff?"

"They want Lonesome Day arrested, Smoky, and Slim Gleason is about the only person in the country who would make any effort to arrest him. Slim and Lonesome have never been friends. I don't approve of him. Slim is nothing but an ignorant gun-slinger. He hasn't a single qualification as a sheriff, but they appointed him."

Smoky rolled and lighted a cigarette as he studied the situation.

"John," he said, "do yuh have to judge all this on a birth certificate? Can Jim Boone produce a marriage certificate?"

The lawyer smiled slowly. "Smoky, I guess I was too surprised to ask him that question," he said. "He probably has one, but it's worth a query. Yes, I believe I will make Jim Boone produce a lot of evidence before this case is settled."

LATER Slim Gleason and Ab Strange limped into town. Twelve miles is a long ways, when you are walking on high-heel boots, and their tempers were at white heat. They were carrying their heavy chaps and Strange was in his bare feet.

Smoky thoroughly enjoyed the sight but kept away from them. No use adding fuel to an already hot fire.

Smoky found Lonesome and Tony playing seven-up at the ranchhouse. They had seen him long before he reached there. Lonesome was curious about what might have been going on in town, and Smoky told him of the queer turn of events. Lonesome was shocked and incredulous.

"You've got to keep under cover," said Smoky. "If they get yuh in that jail, yore name's Mud. And that Slim Gleason ain't goin' to lose any time in gettin' yuh. They hired him especially to get you, and he's awful mad about havin' to walk home."

"I couldn't help it," grinned Lonesome. "I was in the hayloft, and they left them horses so handy. I turned 'em loose after they went back. They hadn't ort to get mad. I was just funnin'."

"Walkin' twelve miles in high-heel boots ain't fun, Lonesome."

"It's exercise—any way yuh look at it—and them two need it. So Uncle Jim made Ab Strange foreman of the HB, eh? Smoky, that Strange is a bad boy. I'll betcha there's more'n one place where they'd like to pin up his scalp. Yuh can tell by the way he wears his gun."

"He's no worse than Slim Gleason."

"That piece of carrion!" snorted Lonesome. "Gee, I'd like to get a chance to see Janet. She don't hate me, does she, Smoky?"

"I'm just wonderin' if she does," replied Smoky. "I don't know how she feels toward Uncle Jim but if it's what I think it is, I don't reckon she'd have any hate left over to use on you, Lonesome."

"Yuh're a lot of comfort, feller. For two cents I'd pile on a bronc, go out to the HB and give Uncle Jim a workin' over. You find out from her, will yuh, Smoky? If he ain't nice to her, I'll blow his clavicle out through his medulla oblonggeta."

"Yuh're gettin' mean," said Smoky.

"It's bein' confined thisaway. I can't move around."

"That jail in Cottonwood ain't so big either," reminded Smoky.

"That's right—it's skimpy. Well, I'll toddle back to my little bed."

"Where yuh sleepin', Lonesome?"

"I cain't tell yuh, Smoky. They might torture yuh until yuh told. *Buenas noches.*"

Smoky went to Cottonwood City, next morning, and received an answer to his telegram. It wasn't from the postmaster at Devil's Gate, but from the telegraph agent. It said:

YOU MUST HAVE WRONG INFORMATION. DEVIL'S GATE ONLY A SIDING AND WHISTLE STOP. NO POSTOFFICE.

Smoky pocketed the telegram and sat down to think things over. The letter from Jim Boone to Henry Boone had been sent from Devil's Gate, and Devil's Gate was only a whistle-stop. No postoffice. Only a whistle-stop—but Jim Boone had an interest in a store there. Judging from the telegram, Devil's Gate was nothing but a little depot.

"Somebody is lyin', and it prob'ly ain't the agent at Devil's Gate," Smoky told himself.

But he decided to keep this information to himself. If Jim Boone had lied, there would be no reason for giving him a chance to change it until Smoky was ready. He found out that John Knowles had gone out to the HB ranch. The old lawyer was seeking evidence. Smoky met Harry Kane, the prosecutor, on the street and Kane wanted to know what happened to the new sheriff.

"He can't hardly walk, Smoky, and he's mad."

"Did he get his warrants?" asked Smoky.

"Yes, he has a warrant for Lonesome and a search warrant. I'm afraid they'll find out he's a very ignorant sheriff, Smoky."

"He'll learn—if he lives," said Smoky.

As they were talking a team and wagon came into the main street. It was the team from the Cross L, with Ab Strange driving, and seated beside him was Tony Montez. There were two persons in the wagon-bed, but they were not completely visible. Two horses were being led behind the wagon. It drew up at the sheriff's office.

"Now what's happened?" asked Smoky. "C'mon, Harry! I'm scared they've got Lonesome!"

They had Lonesome all right—and what a sight he was! His head was bloody, his shirt almost torn off his body, and he was still too dazed to know exactly what was going on.

Tony Montez had a discolored eye and a cut lip. And Slim Gleason, the sheriff, wasn't pretty to look at either. His right eye was almost swollen shut, his right eyebrow seemed to have been lifted a half-inch, and he had a gash on his chin.

AB STRANGE climbed down, went to the rear of the wagon, and both he and Slim Gleason yanked the dazed Lonesome roughly out over the end-gate of the wagon. It was too much for Smoky.

Before either of the men realized Smoky had moved, Ab Strange went down from a terrific smash on the chin. Slim released Lonesome and dodged back, but not in time to avoid a sweeping left hook that almost lifted him off his feet. It hit him on the side of his long neck, and he landed on the seat of his pants.

Tony Montez jumped up and down on the seat.

"*Viva* Smooky!" Tony yelled. "*Viva* Smoky! Geeve eet to heem!"

Smoky backed against the edge of the sidewalk, his right hand and fingers splayed out over the butt of his gun, watching both men. Slim got shakily to his feet, looking blankly around. He backed up, tripped on Strange, and then sat down on him. Harry Kane stepped in, touched Smoky on the arm.

"Good boy!" he said quietly. "But that's enough, Smoky. You can't help Lonesome by whipping the law."

"All right, Harry. But blast their dirty hides, they yanked him—like he was—well, you saw it."

"I saw it, Smoky."

Lonesome was sitting up, grinning through his blood and dirt.

"Set'm up in the other alley!" he croaked.

"Howya comin', boy?"

Quite a crowd had gathered, as Kane urged Smoky to go away.

"We don't want gunplay, Smoky," he said quietly.

Smoky went up to the front of the hotel and sat down, and after a while Tony came up there.

"Sleem say he weel arres' me for not behave ourself, but I theenk he hurt too much of the face to gots the warrant."

"What happened out there, Tony?" asked Smoky.

Tony shrugged. "I guess we gots too uncareful, Smooky. They snick een on us. Lonesome he knock Sleem down and the other pippil heet Lonesome on the tops-knot weeth a seex-shooter. So I," Tony grinned, "do the bes' I can. No good. Lonesome ees knockouts complete. They mak' me heetch up the wagon. Can't do notheeng. Ver' sorry, Smooky."

"You done all right, Tony."

"*Gracias,* Smooky."

The crowd gradually dispersed in front of the office, and Harry Kane came up to where Smoky and Tony were sitting. There was a twinkle in the prosecutor's eyes.

"Slim wanted a warrant for your arrest for assaulting a sheriff, but I talked him out of any action," he said quietly. "You must have hit Strange very hard, Smoky."

"Why?" asked Smoky curiously.

"Well, just between us, he called me warden twice."

"Oh-oh!" breathed Smoky. "Warden, eh? That's interestin', Harry. So our fine-feathered foreman is an ex-jailbird."

"Of course," said the lawyer dryly, "he might have been innocent."

"Of settin' the Chicago fire," amended Smoky. "Thanks, Harry."

"Better stay away from them," advised Kane. "They're both nervous on the trigger right now. Lonesome's all right. I talked with him."

Tony took the team and wagon back to the ranch, and Smoky followed him on horseback. A half mile from the ranch they met Janet. She had been to the ranch, but found no one there.

"Tommy Miller told me about Lonesome," she said. "It's a dirty shame the way they treated him. Lonesome isn't a criminal."

Smoky sighed and shook his head.

"How's things at the ranch, Janet?"

"Terrible. Jim Boone is running things with a high hand. He fired Tommy Miller today. Mr. Knowles came out to talk with him. They had some hot words, and Jim Boone ordered him off the ranch. I heard him tell Mr. Knowles to never come back there again. I don't know what the trouble was, Smoky, but it was plenty."

"That's shore tough, Janet. Everythin' seems to go wrong for yuh."

"I don't understand about that birth certificate," she said. "A long time ago Dad was looking through a tin box of old papers, and one fell on the floor. I picked it up and he said, 'Janet, that is the paper that proves you were born.' Then he laughed about it. But I found something else in that box—an old picture."

She handed it to Smoky. It was a badly blurred picture of two men, standing close together. That is, the heads were blurred, as though both had moved when the shutter clicked. The rest of the picture was fairly clear. On the back was penciled:

> Not very good. I am the one on the left.
> Jim.

Smoky studied the picture closely. The man on the right had his hand on the shoulder of the other man. They were about the same size and weight.

"Too bad the faces don't show better," Smoky said thoughtfully. "Jim is the one on the left. That must be Jim Boone."

"The man who says I am his daughter," said Janet bitterly.

"Yea-a-ah!" breathed Smoky. "The one on the left. Janet, may I keep this picture?"

"Why, yes, if you want to, Smoky. It's of no value to me. I guess it does sort of prove that my father had a brother. I still feel that Henry Boone was my father. I certainly don't claim Jim Boone."

"Thank yuh, Janet. And you say yore father had a birth certificate for you?"

SHE smiled. "He said it was a paper that proved I was born."

"Sounds like a birth certificate. But how do you and Jim Boone get along?"

"We don't. I keep away from him. He went into the kitchen and tried to tell Mulligan how to cook a beef roast. You know Mulligan, Smoky. I heard Jim Boone go through the kitchen doorway and a little later I heard him telling Fred Partee, 'That blasted Chinaman grabbed a cleaver! Can't a man talk to his cook?' Fred said:

"If a boss goes into the kitchen in this country and tries to tell the cook how to cook somethin'—any jury will bring in a verdict of justified killin'. And don't think for a minute that Mulligan was bluffin'."

Smoky grinned thoughtfully. Ideas were beginning to pile up in the back of his mind.

"How did Jim Boone happen to make Strange foreman, Janet?" he asked.

"Nobody knows. That's why Tommy Miller got fired. Strange got tough with Tommy, and Tommy called his bluff. Fred Partee says he is going to quit, too. Smoky, I've heard enough in the last two days to convince me that neither Strange nor Jim Boone are practical cattlemen."

"Jim Boone says he worked cows around Devil's Gate, Montana."

"I know. He is always talking about Devil's Gate. He was a big man in that town, if you believe him."

Smoky grinned. He had a telegram in his pocket that would prove that Jim Boone never was in business in Devil's Gate, and never was in the place, except possibly passing through. But just what good the information would be, he didn't know.

Janet went back home, promising to keep in touch with Smoky.

CHAPTER V

Smoky Gets Busy

EARLY next morning Smoky went to town. He wanted to talk with John Knowles and find out what his quarrel with Jim Boone was about. But the lawyer wasn't in his office. Smoky drifted down to the sheriff's office. The door was shut but unlocked, so Smoky went in.

Smoky wanted a chance to talk with Lonesome Day, and he was all primed to have an argument with Slim Gleason, but Slim was not in the office. Strangely enough, the door to the corridor of the jail was open; a door which was always kept shut and locked when a prisoner was in the cell. Smoky called Slim's name and got some sort of an answer from back in the jail.

He went back there and found, not Lonesome Day, but Slim Gleason, in the locked cell. Slim was mad. He swore he had spent the night in that blasted cell, and nobody had paid any attention to his yells. Smoky looked him over curiously and asked what happened.

"Happened?" wailed Slim. "I brought a meal for that blasted Lonesome Day. I shoved it under the door and was standin' there at the bars. Lonesome said, 'Slim, there's a spider on yore back! Turn around and I'll get it.'

"Well, blast his hide, I turned around. Know what he done? He reached through, pulled my gun out of the holster and swore he'd blow my head off if I didn't unlock the door. I unlocked it—and he locked me in."

Smoky grinned slowly. "Yuh're easy scared, feller," he said. "Lonesome wouldn't have shot yuh. If he did—he'd still be in jail."

"And I'd be dead," added Slim sourly.

Smoky looked around the cell.

"The keys are there on the floor," Slim said.

"Yeah, I see 'em," Smoky nodded. "Well, I hope yuh have a nice time, Slim. *Adios.*"

And Smoky walked out, kicking the keys aside, as he went.

"He-e-ey!" Slim yelled, as he went. "You dad-blamed, ignorant saddle-slicker—let me out!"

But Smoky paid no attention. He headed for his horse.

"A fine sheriff!" snorted Smoky to himself. "Can't even lie good. I could believe that Lonesome out-smarted him and got out of the cell, but who took away the tray and uneaten food? It's a cinch Lonesome didn't, and I'm supposed to be the first one to find Slim. For some reason they've taken Lonesome out of the jail—and I don't like it."

Smoky rode swiftly to the ranch. If Lonesome was loose he'd head for the Cross L, but Lonesome was not there. At least, Tony hadn't seen him. Smoky told the Mexican what Slim had told him regarding Lonesome's escape.

"*Viva* Lonesome!" Tony said. "Goods man! Now they don't fin' heem, eh? Good!"

"Not good, Tony. Slim lied. They took Lonesome out of there, and left Slim in jail, so his story would prove an alibi."

"Why?" asked Tony anxiously. "Why tak' heem out, Smooky?"

"I'm just guessin', Tony, but I'm also bettin' that somethin' was said and they knew Lonesome heard it. Tony, they couldn't let Lonesome tell what he heard, so they've ditched him."

"*Madre de Dios!* That ees bads. Who say sometheeng?"

"I wish I knew, Tony. I'm scared that Lonesome is up against somethin' that's worse than a murder charge."

Smoky was home about an hour, when John Knowles came. Smoky knew it must be important business that would cause Knowles to drive that twelve miles. He met the lawyer in front of the house.

"I had to come out and see you, Smoky," Knowles said. "Slim Gleason says you refused to let him out of that locked cell. If Lonesome came here, will you warn him that the commissioners are going to offer a reward for him—dead or alive."

Smoky's jaw tightened. Dead or alive!

"John, we've got to stop that reward!" he said. "Don't yuh see? Lonesome never escaped—they took him out. Slim Gleason is a liar. If there's a reward for Lonesome, they might kill him for it."

"For heaven's sake, Smoky, what do you mean?" gasped Knowles.

"I tell you—Lonesome didn't escape. Gleason is a liar."

"But, Smoky, how do you know he lied? He said Lonesome took his gun and forced him to—"

"I know what he said, John. He said he had just shoved Lonesome's supper under the door. Lonesome got Slim's gun and forced him to let him out. Fine. I was the first one to find Slim in jail, and that tray and dishes were not in that cell. Who took 'em out? I tell yuh, he's a liar. If Lonesome was loose, he'd come here."

"Let's sit down on the porch and think calmly," said Knowles. "This deal is getting more complicated every day."

SMOKY rolled a cigarette and there was no conversation until the smoke was lighted. Then Knowles said quietly:

"I had trouble with Jim Boone yesterday."

"Yeah, I heard yuh did. Janet told me. She said Jim Boone drew a deadline against yuh, John."

"Janet only heard part of it," said Knowles sadly. "I don't want to tell her but she'll find it out. Smoky, I asked Jim Boone if he had a marriage license to show that he was the father of Janet. At least to show that he and the woman, whose name is on that birth certificate were married. He hasn't one, Smoky."

"He hasn't? That's fine. Why, if he—"

"Wait a minute, Smoky. He says he never married the woman. He says the people thought he was married, but they were not; there is no marriage certificate."

"You mean—why, John, that's the dirtiest deal I ever heard of. I don't believe it. Hang it, I don't believe Jim Boone is her father."

"Well, I told him what I thought about him," said Knowles, "and he ordered me off the ranch."

"That's what Janet told me. She also told me that Henry Boone had her birth certificate several years ago, but it's gone."

"And she doesn't know where she was born," said Knowles.

"She didn't tell me that, John."

"She told me. It was some place in Colorado, she thought. This birth certificate that Jim Boone has, shows she was born in a place called Three Forks, which was wiped out in a flood about fifteen years ago, and all records destroyed. I remember that flood, Smoky. I was in Denver at the time. He didn't lie about that part of it."

"I'm goin' to Cottonwood City right now," declared Smoky. "I've got to try and stop that reward idea, John, and stop it fast."

"Go ahead—and may you have luck, Smoky. I'll be along later."

Smoky was not rated as a hard rider but this time he went to town in record time. The office of Harry Kane, prosecutor, was empty so Smoky headed for the office of the commissioners. A man in the hallway told him that the commissioners were in session with the prosecutor and sheriff.

Smoky threw the door open and walked in. There were seven men in the room, five of them seated at a big table. Harry Kane was standing at one end of the table, and Slim Gleason was looking through a window, toward the main street. Everyone turned, as Smoky closed the door.

"This is a private meeting and—" began one of the men.

"It ain't private now!" snapped Smoky. "You men are goin' to offer a reward for Lonesome Day, dead or alive?"

"Lonesome Day is a dangerous criminal!" snapped Oscar Johnson, chairman of the Board. "He locked the sheriff in his own jail and he—"

"You ain't offered that reward yet, have yuh, Harry?" asked Smoky.

"They haven't decided on the amount, Smoky."

"Then don't do it, gentlemen. The minute you offer that reward—you sign Lonesome Day's death warrant. He'll be killed within

twenty-four hours."

Slim Gleason came back to the table from the window.

"What do you mean?" he demanded.

"You know what I mean, you lyin' skunk," said Smoky quietly. "Don't lie to me! You know where he is."

"You can't talk to me like that!" snapped the sheriff. "I'll—"

"You'll what?" asked Smoky, swaying forward, his hand opening and closing over the butt of his holstered gun. Smoky's eyes were slitted, his mouth merely a penciled line. "You'll do—nothin'! Slim, you ain't got the sand to die full of hot lead."

Slim's Adam's-apple acted queerly and he seemed to have a bit of trouble with his breathing. Slowly he put his right hand on top of the table, shoving down hard for support.

"Gentlemen!" whispered Oscar Johnson. "Gentlemen!"

"Sit still," said Smoky quietly. "Just don't get in line. Either this sheriff is goin' to crawl—or one of us goes out feet-first. It's up to you, Slim."

"I—I don't know . . ." faltered Slim. "I haven't done anythin', and I—"

"Get out of here!" snapped Smoky, pointing at the door.

"Well, sure—I—well, all right—sure."

Slim went out and closed the door behind him. Harry Kane laughed shortly.

"Fine sheriff!" he said emphatically.

"What on earth is this all about, Hill?" asked the chairman. The others echoed the same question.

"I can't answer it yet," replied Smoky. "But won't yuh take my word for it? Don't offer that reward. Lonesome was taken out of that jail last night and the men who took him out will kill him for the reward, because they can't afford to have him alive."

KANE stared at Smoky in amazement. "Smoky, you don't know what you're saying!" Kane exclaimed.

"Let me prove it, Harry. Delay that reward—won't yuh?"

"We will," replied Oscar Johnson. "We wasn't in favor of it in the first place, but the sheriff thought it might get results."

"I wish he'd reached for his gun," said Smoky. "Thank you, gentlemen."

Smoky went out. On the street he saw Slim Gleason, talking with Ab Strange over by a hitch-rack. As he passed the open door of the postoffice, Jim Boone came out, some letters and papers in his hands.

"Ah, Mr. Hill!" exclaimed Jim Boone. "Glad to see you."

"If I wasn't a truthful person, I'd return that compliment," said Smoky. Jim Boone stopped, looking curiously at Smoky.

"I don't believe I understand that remark, Hill," he said.

"They didn't talk that way to you in Devil's Gate, eh?"

"Why—uh—no, they certainly did not. Why do you mention Devil's Gate?"

"I just heard from there, Boone."

"Oh, yuh did, eh? You—well, I still don't understand you."

"Think it over, Boone, and maybe you'll understand. And when you do understand—just remember this—the road is open—now."

Smoky walked on, leaving Jim Boone staring after him. Smoky didn't look back. He was talking to himself.

"Yo're breedin' bullet-holes in yore hide, Smoky Hill," he said. "You and yore big mouth—shootin' at the moon. But if they scare bad enough, maybe they'll make a break. You ain't got brains enough to figure things out, so you've got to shoot things out, I reckon."

But the danger of that Dead-or-Alive reward was over, and they knew that Smoky hadn't swallowed Slim's story of the escape of Lonesome Day. But Smoky had a hunch.

He got on his horse, rode out about a mile from town, where he cut across to the road which led to the HB ranch. About two miles further on he drew off the road in a mesquite thicket and settled down to see what came along.

And it came soon—Jim Boone and Ab Strange. They stopped not over a hundred yards from where Smoky sat in the thicket and talked for several minutes. Then Jim Boone rode on alone and Ab Strange turned to the left, disappearing from sight.

Smoky scowled thoughtfully as he tried to remember something. That old road, more like a trail now, which led to Apache Wells, one of the HB windmills—that was where Strange had gone. Maybe it was a perfectly innocent thing—part of Strange's duties as a HB rider. But Smoky was suspicious, and Smoky also knew a shortcut to Apache Wells.

He rode out of that thicket, turned back, struck an old cattle-trail and headed into the hills. The road was at least two miles further than the short-cut, and Ab Strange

wasn't in sight when Smoky rode up to the old windmill, which was creaking in the vagrant breeze.

Just beyond it was an old tumble-down shack, used for a long time as a line-camp.

Smoky spurred over there, dismounted behind the old shack, and came up to a rear window which had been broken out.

There was Lonesome Day—roped hand and foot, gagged, sitting on the floor, his back against the wall!

It required very little time for Smoky to release him, cut away the gag and get Lonesome outside. Lonesome was stiff and awkward, and unable even to talk, but he hurried as fast as he could. Smoky led his horse into the brush, and they sat there, watching the shack and the windmill. Lonesome was too busy, trying to rub circulation into his arms and legs, to bother about anything else. He grimaced at Smoky and worked his lower jaw violently.

Then came Ab Strange. He dismounted in front of the shack, looked about him, and seemed satisfied with everything. He took the gun from his holster and examined it closely, after which he walked into the doorless shack with the gun in his hand.

But he was only in there a moment or two before he ran out, stopped and looked all around. He still had the gun in his hand, but now he slapped it back into his holster, went quickly to his horse and rode away at a fast gallop.

Lonesome massaged his jaw, rubbed his numbed lips and managed to whisper:

"Why didn't yuh shoot him, Smoky?"

"When yuh're huntin' a grizzly, don't shoot skunks," said Smoky.

"Uh-huh. But that skunk came in there to kill me."

"He didn't—and that suits me. Can yuh tell me what happened?"

"I'm gettin' better," said Lonesome. "Give me a smoke, I ain't had one for years. You better roll it—I'm still all thumbs."

With the cigarette burning, Lonesome said:

"It was kinda queer, Smoky. Somebody was in the office with Slim. It sounded like two men, but I couldn't git what they said, even if the door was open. Then I heard one of 'em say, 'Well, if he gets too blamed nosey, we'll stop him cold.' I was hongry. I yelled, 'I heard all that; so yuh might as well get me somethin' to eat before yuh start shootin'.'

"Well, Slim came back there after while with my dinner. He unlocked the cell door, and told me to come out. I done that. He told me to turn around, and he handcuffed me. He had a cloth and threw it over my face. I tried to kick him, but missed, and then I think somebody helped him. They forced my mouth open and gagged me. Then they took me out the back door where they must have had a buckboard. They dumped me in there and drove out some'ers, where they made me get on a horse—and here I was."

"Didn't they tell yuh anythin', Lonesome?"

"Well, they said they was goin' to cut off my ears, 'cause I hear too well. Then I heard one of 'em say, 'He's safe here and we won't need to hold him very long, anyway.' "

"You ain't a very big help to me, Lonesome."

"Well, I'm shore glad I can't say that about you, pardner. What's next?"

"Go home on one horse, I reckon. C'mon."

CHAPTER VI

Windup in Smoke

TONY MONTEZ was jubilant when he saw Lonesome, and his execution of the English language was brutal. He ended his discourse with:

"And am you glad from me to you!"

Lonesome grinned. "I shore am, Tony. How about some beans?"

"I got heem—plenty. We're you been kip ourself?"

"Oh, I been on a little vacation. Nothin' to do but set still."

"Sure. That ees good from the seat of our pant. I gots the bean hot from the stove. *Viva* everytheeng!"

* * * * *

Late that afternoon Janet came in from the ranch and went straight to John Knowles. She had had hot words with Jim Boone who told her she could get out and stay out.

"He is impossible when he is sober—but he is drinking now," she told Knowles. "I simply can not stay out there any longer. He came from town sober, but later Ab Strange came in and they've been drinking ever since. I'm afraid of what they might do."

"I'm glad you came in, Janet," said the lawyer. "You are going right down to my house. Mrs. Knowles will be mighty glad to

have company."

"I heard that Lonesome escaped from the jail."

"That, my dear, is something we know little about. He is gone. Today the commissioners were going to offer a reward for him, dead or alive, but in some way Smoky Hill blocked that. I hear that Smoky called our newly-appointed sheriff several kinds of skunk, and accused him of trying to get Lonesome killed. How it will all come out I have no idea. Wild gossip around here is rife. They expect that a gun-battle will break out between Smoky and Slim Gleason at any moment. That, of course, is a little far fetched, but it could happen."

"But where on earth is Lonesome?" asked Janet anxiously.

"No one seems to know, Janet. Slim Gleason says that Lonesome reached through the bars and took his gun, after which he forced Slim to open the cell. Then he locked Slim in his own cell."

"I wish I had a chance to talk with Smoky Hill."

"If I see Smoky I'll tell him where you are, Janet. If you are ready, we'll go down to my house. In the morning I'll see what can be done to change Jim Boone's impression that he is taking over the HB spread. . . ."

It was about dark when Smoky and Tony rode into Cottonwood City that evening. Lonesome came with them but turned off the road and tied his horse in some cottonwoods on the outskirts of the town. Smoky had no idea of what might happen—if anything—but Lonesome was to stay in an old shed back of the jail, and Tony would join him later.

John Knowles was the first person to meet Smoky, and he told Smoky about Janet being practically bounced off the HB. Smoky said he would see Janet, if possible, and to tell her that Lonesome was all right. Smoky and Tony went into the Buckhorn Saloon where Slim Gleason was drinking at the bar with several men.

There had been so much conversation regarding the trouble between Smoky and Slim Gleason that his drinking partners moved quickly aside, getting out of range of any gun-trouble. But Slim wasn't fight-minded. He looked moodily upon Smoky, and went out of the place.

Smoky saw him meet Ab Strange near the doorway, and Ab Strange grabbed him by the arm, talking swiftly. Slim jerked away from him but Ab's words must have been convincing. After a few moments they went across the street toward Slim's office. Smoky's lips narrowed. Ab Strange was probably telling Slim of Lonesome's escape.

Smoky took Tony with him and they went down by the feed corral where they could see the sheriff's office. The door was closed and the window-shade was down. Smoky knew that both men were frightened. If they had intended killing Lonesome for something they believed he had overheard, there was a basis for anxiety on their part.

"Tony, you'll find Lonesome in that old shed," Smoky said. "Slim and Ab may be on the verge of pullin' out. Don't let 'em."

"*Si*, Smooky—we stop heem."

Smoky sat down against the corral fence, where it was quite dark, and watched the office. There was little activity on the street. He had been there about an hour, when Slim and Ab came from the office. They put out the light and Smoky heard them lock the office.

But instead of going up the street, they came across, stopping not over fifty feet from where Smoky hunched against the fence. He could only hear an occasional word for some time, but finally heard:

"I tell yuh, he's goin' to make a break. He's yaller."

For a while the conversation was low-pitched.

"Well, somebody had to help him get loose, Ab," he then heard Slim say.

"Yeah," replied Ab Strange. "And it was Smoky Hill. I tell yuh Lonesome knows too much. We've bungled the whole blamed works. Jim's too scared to do anythin' but drink raw whiskey. What a mess!"

AFTER that there was an interval of low-pitched conversation, and then Strange said:

"Naw, she pulled out this afternoon. I dunno where she went—probably with that lawyer. He's no fool either. Jim didn't pull the job right—he got too tough. But he's as bull-headed as a pup."

"Do you think he's ready to skin out on us, Ab?"

"Just as sure as anythin'. I tell yuh he's scared. He was all right, until Lonesome got away." Slim asked a question.

"That jasper ain't too drunk to try and save his own skin," Ab said.

"He's scared of Smoky Hill, eh?"

"Why not? If Smoky cut Lonesome loose,

Smoky knows enough to send us all over the road. And if Smoky grabs Jim, he'll talk his big mouth off. We've got to stop Jim, I tell yuh."

"But I'm the sheriff, Ab."

"Yeah—and what a sheriff! You keep out of it. Yore star won't save yore skin, I'll tell yuh that. I could cut Jim's throat for bunglin' things. Why didn't the fool take it easy? No, no-o-o—he had to become the big boss right now. Why, the half-wit ruined everythin' when he handled the girl like he did. She's got friends here. They'd gun down the big mouthed fool if she told 'em to. I told him to handle her with kid gloves—and look what he done!"

"I don't think he'll hightail it, Ab—it means too much money."

"Money don't mean a thing to a yaller-belly like him. Well, we'll have to watch. Have yuh got a rifle over in the office?"

Smoky couldn't hear Slim's answer but they went back to the office, went inside, but did not light the lamp. It was evident that Jim Boone was frightened badly enough to leave the HB and all it meant to him. Smoky grinned and wondered what would happen next. Slim and Strange seemed to be staying a long time in that dark office.

They finally came out, crossed the street again and halted further up the street, but just about as close to Smoky. Strange was cursing quietly as he shoved cartridges into the rifle. Smoky could hear the click of the mechanism, as he levered a shell into the chamber.

"Well, there yuh are," Slim said. "Somebody swiped our horses and now we're stuck. I tell yuh, I'm worried, Ab! The livery-stable is closed, and we're on foot if anythin' breaks."

Smoky knew what had happened now. Their horses had been left in Slim's stable, and Lonesome and Tony had taken them both away. When Smoky had told them to not let Slim get away—that had been enough for Lonesome. At any rate, it had Slim and Strange worried. Smoky hugged his knees and listened closely, but the conversation was too low for him to hear what they were planning.

Then they separated—Slim going toward the Half-Moon Saloon while Strange cut diagonally across the street toward the general store, which was closed. Smoky lost track of them in the dark. So he circled around and came in behind the jail, where he whistled a low call.

Lonesome answered him and he joined them under a low shed.

"The sheriff got disappointed, Smoky," whispered Lonesome. "Him and Strange come out the back of the office, and Strange said, 'We'll just hide them horses in a handy spot.' But there wasn't no horses."

"I figured that you'd move 'em," replied Smoky. "They're worried."

"What's the game?" asked Lonesome. "Are they aimin' to high-tail it out of here?"

"Somethin' like that. They think you heard somethin' in the jail that'd send 'em to the penitentiary—and it ain't settin' good on their digestions, Lonesome. You boys stay here—I'll look some more."

When Smoky went back to the street there was a light in the livery-stable. He went over there but it was only the stable-man and the stage-driver, harnessing the four horses. The stage would leave for Washout in a few minutes. Smoky went back across the street.

Somewhere between the office and the stage-depot was Ab Strange, armed with a Winchester. Smoky could see the two lighted lanterns hanging from the porch of the stage-depot.

Smoky wanted to see what was going on. But he was not going to expose himself to Strange and his rifle, so he slipped down a dark alley and made his way cautiously. There was another narrow alley between the general store and an empty store building, and directly across the street was the Half-Moon Saloon.

Looking up the alley, and against the lights, he could see the figure of a man, silhouetted—hunched low beside the sidewalk—against the corner of the store.

This man would be invisible from the street but was plainly visible, back-lighted by the saloon lights. Smoky knew that this was Ab Strange. It was not over a hundred feet to the stage-depot from the alley where the front was illuminated.

SMOKY went back, crossed the street beyond the livery-stable and came in behind the Half-Moon Saloon. There was one window in the rear of the saloon, but he was unable to locate Slim Gleason in there.

As he turned away he heard a man walking. It was too dark to see more than that it was a person. The man stopped at the corner of the saloon, but slowly moved ahead, coming to a stop near the hitch-rack. Directly

across the street was the stage-depot, and in the lights Smoky saw that the man was carrying a valise.

Smoky didn't hesitate now. He raced back the way he came, and as he crossed the street the stage and the four horses came out of the livery-stable, whirled in the middle of the street and headed for the stage-depot. Smoky ran through the alley near the sheriff's office and circled back to that alley where he had seen the man he believed to be Ab Strange.

But Smoky was going slowly now, moving cautiously. Not only was the silhouette of Ab Strange in the same place, but the head and shoulders of another man were visible. And this man was not over twenty feet from where Smoky crouched. Evidently the man was so intent on watching up the alley that he hadn't heard Smoky.

Suddenly a rifle shot blasted from the alley, and a moment later Smoky heard the beat of running footsteps as the shooter came back through the alley.

But as he came out, the man at the corner stepped into relief against the Half-Moon lights, and it looked as though he fired a shot against the body of the running man, who went sprawling. Twice more the six-shooter blasted down at the sprawled runner, and then the shooter went pounding down toward the sheriff's office.

Smoky was shocked to inaction for the moment. Then he ran around to the stage-depot, where a crowd had gathered around the body of a man sprawled on the sidewalk.

"Somebody's gone for the doctor," said one of the men. "It's that new owner of the HB—Jim Boone. Where's the sheriff, anyway?"

Smoky shoved in closer. It was Jim Boone, his shirt-bosom covered with gore. No one seemed to know where the shot came from. As Smoky stepped back, Slim Gleason came running up the sidewalk, shoved the men aside and looked down at the body. He was panting heavily.

"It's Jim Boone," said one of the men.

"What happened?" panted Slim huskily. "Who shot him?"

"He ain't dead!" exclaimed one of the men. "He opened his eyes."

"Ain't dead, huh?" asked Slim hoarsely.

"Listen to me, Slim," said Smoky. Everyone turned to Smoky.

"He ain't dead, Slim," said Smoky coldly. "Ab Strange didn't do as good a job on Jim Boone as you did on Strange. I saw yuh shoot him."

Slim Gleason wasn't exactly a brave man, but he had the nerve of a trapped wolf. His right hand slapped hard against his holster as he streaked for his gun, but Smoky's split-second draw and pull was all too fast for Slim Gleason to match.

The heavy bullet struck Slim in the right shoulder, knocking him off balance and shocking the gun from his right hand. Then Slim's heel caught on Jim Boone, and down he went, falling clear across the body of Jim Boone and almost against the rear wheel of the stage.

Smoky stepped back, the gun clenched in his hand. John Knowles was there. Harry Kane came, shoving men aside. No one seemed to know what it was all about.

"For Heaven's sake, Smoky—what happened?" Knowles asked.

"Crooks fell out, John," replied Smoky calmly. "Jim Boone, or whatever his name may be, tried to run out on 'em, and they was afraid he'd talk. So Ab Strange shot him from the alley. Slim Gleason prob'ly thought Boone was dead; so he killed Strange, figurin' maybe, without them, we can't pin anythin' on Slim—and that's why he done it."

"But what have they done that's crooked?" asked Harry Kane, the prosecutor.

The doctor had reached the scene and was making a quick examination of Jim Boone. Slim Gleason wasn't dead. He managed to sit up.

"Slim, Jim Boone ain't dead," Smoky said. "He's yellow enough to talk, so you might beat him to it. Yuh know what I mean—turn State's evidence. It'll save yore neck, if yuh talk fast."

"I'll talk," said Slim hoarsely. "Might as well."

"Do you want to ask him questions, Harry?" asked Smoky.

"You go ahead," replied the prosecutor. "After all, I don't know any of the angles, Smoky."

"Who is Jim Boone, Slim?" asked Smoky.

"He's Jim Haslin. He was Jim Boone's pardner. Jim died. Me and Strange used to be with Haslin. I came here to work, and they framed the deal. Jim Boone told Haslin all about Henry Boone and the HB, and they cooked up a plan to steal the spread. Strange served five years for killin' a man in Utah."

THIS information did not surprise Smoky. He nodded.

"How did Haslin get Janet's birth certificate, Slim?"

"I stole it from a box of stuff that Henry Boone had. I sent it to Haslin and he fixed it up. Used somethin' to take off the ink. He said it was fool-proof. Jim Haslin fixed up a plumb good story and we'd have got away with it, but Haslin talked too loud in the office and Lonesome Day heard him."

"Better let me examine this man, before he talks any more," said the doctor. "This other man will live, I believe."

Smoky turned to the crowd. "Some of you boys bring that man from the alley between the store and that next building. He's dead, I think."

"He's dead as a door-knob," said Lonesome Day. "Me and Tony looked him over."

The men stared curiously at Lonesome, but said nothing.

"It's all right, Lonesome," Smoky said. "Janet is down at Knowles' house. Better get down there and tell her she still owns the HB."

"I'm half-way there right now!" gasped Lonesome. "Much obliged!"

"*Viva* Smooky!" whispered Tony.

"How on earth did you find out all these things, Smoky?" asked the prosecutor.

"I didn't, but I had a hunch," replied Smoky. He reached down and took one of Jim Haslin's hands. "See that crooked finger, Harry? Well, Janet found a picture of Jim Boone and another man. On the back was written, 'I'm the one on the left.' And, Harry! The man on the right had that finger!"

"The crook of fate," said the lawyer quietly. "But what did Lonesome hear Haslin say in the sheriff's office, Smoky?"

"That's the funny part of it—he didn't hear anythin'."

"Wait a minute, Doc," whispered Slim Gleason. "Smoky, did you say—"

"That's right, Slim—Lonesome never heard anythin'."

The doctor grunted quietly.

"Somethin' wrong, Doc?" one of the men said.

"Yes. Gleason fainted!"

The prosecutor unpinned the star from Gleason's coat and handed it to Smoky.

"The rest is only a matter of form, Smoky," he said. "That is, if yuh want to be a sheriff again."

"If my pardner'll keep out of trouble," said Smoky earnestly.

"He won't," declared John Knowles. "I just came up from my home—and from what I seen down there—"

"Is Gleason goin' to live?" asked Smoky.

"He's back again," said the doctor, as Slim Gleason opened his eyes again. "Shock, I suppose."

"Then we can make him pay for the murder of Henry Boone."

"I talked, didn't I?" wailed Slim. "Well, it wasn't me—it was Ab Strange. I never killed anybody."

"That's all I wanted to know," said Smoky. "It's yore job now, Harry. Lonesome is cleared of a murder charge, and Janet gets the HB."

"You know w'at, Smooky?" asked Tony sadly.

"No, I don't, Tony."

"Lonesome say to me tonight, 'Tony, eef I gots hang by those neck ontil you are died, I geeve you my new hat.' That ees w'at he say."

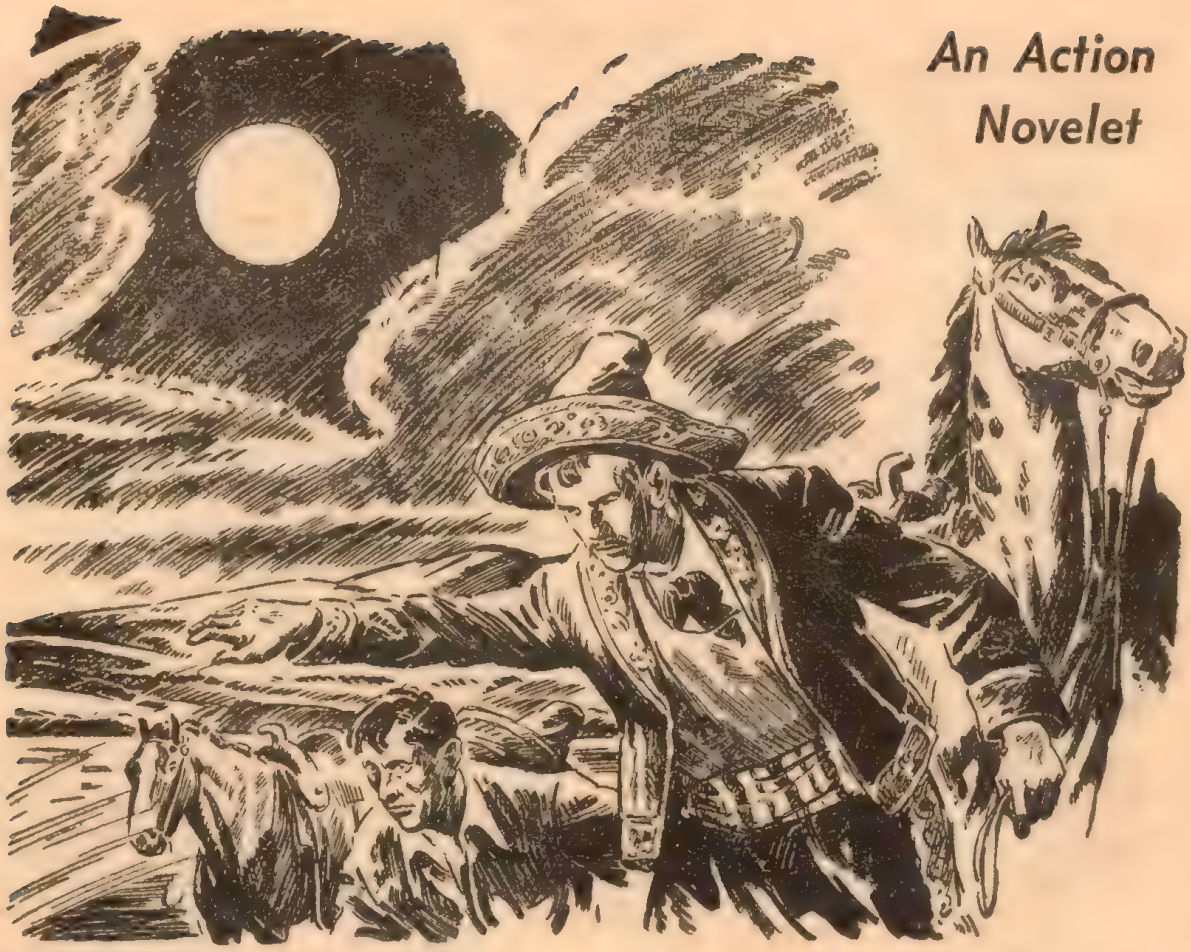
"Well?" queried Smoky.

Tony shrugged his thin shoulders.

"No luck," he said. "Nice hat, too."

Coming Next Month: Walt Slade, the famed Texas Ranger known as El Halcon, stars in THE DESERT MYSTERY—an exciting complete novel by BRADFORD SCOTT packed with smashing action!

As the knife went whizzing by harmlessly, Shanigan fired at the nearest outlaw who uttered a cry of pain, dropped his gun and fell to the ground



An Action Novelet

THE BORDER RANGER

By MEL PITZER

Fiery Pat Shanigan loses his Texas Ranger star, but that doesn't stop him from risking his neck in a rip-roaring campaign to smash a tough gang of Rio Grande outlaws!

CHAPTER I

Good Resolutions—Oh, Yeah?

THE town of Amigo sprawled on the American side of the Rio Grande near an international bridge. A great many persons had wondered about the name of the place, but it can be told that it was more as a gesture of friendliness to Mexico across the way than for any other reason.

It was only a junk heap of a town, which still had to grow up in time. The few houses and stores of which it consisted were made mostly of adobe bricks covered with whitewash, the white turning to yellow here and there from the spattering of rain and the usual covering of dust. Also heat had split the walls in many places.

The streets and alleys, deep in alkali, gave resting places for chickens and pigs, while backyards rang with shouts of Mexican and white children at play.

Five miles away the railroad was cutting through a tunnel that provided work for a number of men and these laborers spent

their pay in Amigo, which helped it to flourish, while from the few small cow outfits scattered around, punchers also came in to spend their earnings.

Of course, to see that everyone lived up to the name of the town and kept friendly, a detachment of Rangers was at the place.

The half dozen huts where they were quartered squatted at one end of Amigo, inside a big square made of pointed saplings twelve feet high standing side by side.

In the longest and cleanest adobe in the stockade on this particular afternoon, tall, lean Lieutenant Bill Griffin sat before a roughly-hewn wooden desk and stared out of a nearby window. His black brows were pinched hard together in thought, while he ran a hand in aimless gesture through his wavy hair that had a slight trace of gray at the temples.

Griffin was only in his early thirties, but he took the Rangers seriously and anyone who takes anything seriously enough for any length of time is bound to get gray sooner or later.

Now shaking his head slightly, he turned his eyes to the two letters that were on the desk before him and began reading one of them for the third time:

Dear Griffin:

When I told the higher-ups that you were the only man for the job in Amigo, I thought I was putting my finger on the smuggling that had opened up down there. As yet, you haven't done a thing to stop the traffic of it, which seems to be coming over the Border from that section. I'll have to send in my report to the ex-officio of the Rangers very shortly—I mean the Governor. He'll want to know why we couldn't break that thing and we'll all catch blue blazes. Also, if he calls in the Army to take over, we'll never hear the end of it. Get on your toes, Griffin, and dig into things down there.

Yours truly,
Capt. David Williams,
Commanding Co. B,
Texas Rangers

Lieutenant Griffin pushed the letter aside with a wry face and began to peruse a second, which ran:

Dear Bill:

Since that last letter I wrote you a couple of days ago, I've made arrangements to send you down a new man. His name is Pat Shanigan. Now listen, Billy, Shanigan is the nephew of an old Ranger captain, who is a friend of the Governor's. It seems Shanigan has been a wild sort, who does his best to help Four-Star Hennessey and Mexican tequila stay in the limelight.

His uncle finally decided that the Rangers might make a man of him and Shanigan agreed, as he's not a bad sort of gent and can be made to see that his ways are wrong. But he claims circumstances and hard luck interfere with his life. The strange part of it is that when he's sober he seems to do everything wrong and when he's boiled he comes out on the right side of things.

He's been with us for a while, but on his first day off down here he got boiled, fought three strangers who insulted his brogue and we found out, after the party was over, that they were three disguised rustlers we were after, but could never lay our hands on.

You remember that gambling den, the Green Light cantina, that the mayor and citizens' committee tried to get something on, so they could close it up. Well, on his next flyer Shanigan picked out that place to do his drinking and gambling in. He started playing roulette, lost his money and decided to find out if the wheel was on the level. Two bouncers tried to throw him out, but got tossed out instead and then Shanigan proceeded to wreck the place. When he finished we found brakes on the roulette wheels and magnetic machinery controlling the dice games. The Green Light will stay shut for a long time.

The people have been behind him because of those two jobs and a couple of other things that he did to his credit whenever he broke loose. But his uncle and the Governor think otherwise. They say he'll disgrace the Rangers and ordered me to send him to an out-of-the-way place where the only thing he'll disturb, if he can't be shown the right path, are the wolves and coyotes.

So Griffin, old son, here's another job for you. If you can't make Shanigan stay off the booze, send in his resignation. Those are orders. Good luck!

Dave Williams

It was at sunset that the object of Lieutenant Griffin's last letter rode along the embankment of the Rio on the American side until at last he turned his tall roan away from the water toward the main street of Amigo.

Entering this, Ranger Patrick Shanigan pushed his dusty Stetson back on his mop of brown hair, lifted a good-natured face and took in the town with an appraising eye. He sighed heavily.

" 'Tis the end of the world that they sent me to," he muttered sadly. " 'Tis the punishment I deserve for not knowin' how to behave meself."

HE ADJUSTED his two hundred pounds of heavy-shouldered body in the saddle and lifted a massive hand to scratch his craglike chin in gloomy reflection. He had proceeded only a short distance further, when his face suddenly brightened. He pulled

the roan in before a weather-beaten building, whose boards were warped and badly in need of paint. But it was the neat white letters upon the clean window which caught Shanigan's gaze. The inscription read:

CLANCY MULDOON'S BAR—COLD BEER

But again Shanigan's gloom returned and he shrugged dejectedly.

"I give me word that I wasn't gonna drink no more an' I mane it," he mumbled. "There'll be no takin' of the stuff of me own accord, I'm sayin'."

He flicked the reins of the roan and as the animal lurched forward, Shanigan again halted him, squinting an eye at the sign once more.

"I forgot to ask meself," he argued aloud. "Here I'm finishin' up a long ride and me mouth is dry an' then I see a sign what sez Clancy Muldoon and is it right, I ask meself now, that a gent by name of Patrick Shanigan should pass up a gent by name of Clancy Muldoon, wan of his own kind, without havin' a drink to each other's health? Is wan drink gonna start me skiddin' agin, I sez to meself?"

Shanigan slammed a big fist onto the saddle pummel. "It is, I'm sayin'. I ain't touchin' the stuff."

At this moment a rotund, but powerful fellow in a white shirt, with the sleeves rolled up showing brawny arms, stepped to the doorway of the saloon. He was bald, except for a tuft of gray hair circling above his ears. A not-too-clean apron girded his expansive stomach.

"Is it the heat that's bilin' yure brains me bucko an' makin' ye talk to yerself or are yez in love?" he called out. "Whatever it is, come in and let some of Clancy Muldoon's beer help yez along."

" 'Tis what I was thinkin' of doin'," answered Shanigan. "But I have swore off the stuff."

"Can it be that I'm hearin' things?" bellowed the rotund man. "Or is it wan of me own kind yez are? Is the brogue yours or mebbe it's Clancy Muldoon you're funnin' with! If it is, ye thick-necked moose, I'll knock yure teeth through the back of yure head."

" 'Tis me own brogue," retorted Shanigan. "Nothin' would plaze me better thin to have a drink with yez."

"Well, come on, then, unless I ain't good enough to bend an elbow with."

"I swore off the stuff," insisted Shanigan, doggedly.

"Is wan gonna hurt yez?" argued Muldoon. "Here's two Irishmen meet and wan drink is gonna spoil our greetin', is it?"

"You're right," announced Shanigan, "I sez that to meself before that it ain't right to pass yez up. Wan drink it'll be."

He let his big body slip from the saddle and took the roan into the shade at the side of the building, where a hogshead was half sunk into the ground. It held water that trickled into it from a rusty pipe. The roan plunged its nose into the coolness.

" 'Tis a good-lookin' horse you got," said Muldoon. "Sixteen hands he must be."

"He looks big and he looks strong but he ain't got the legs to carry me weight," answered Shanigan. "It's legs that count on a horse, I say. They can have the heart and the muscles and the brains, but like a good fighter, if they ain't got the legs they're no good at all."

He followed Muldoon into the dim coolness of the saloon. At one side tables stood around on the sawdust floor. Opposite was a long bar. Muldoon strode behind this, while Shanigan went up and leaned his elbows upon it.

"Just wan, me lad," said Shanigan. "Then I got to report to me commander that Patrick Shanigan, the new Ranger, same bein' me, has arrived. And it's the circumstances of me life that your name is Muldoon and the luck that you're Irish, that makes me take this wan drink."

Muldoon deftly filled up two schooners of beer, then set out two tumblers and filled them with Four-Star Hennessey. It was the sight of this bottle that put a gleam in Shanigan's eyes. With health to each other they downed the drink.

"That's that," grunted Muldoon. "But is it right that we don't drink to the Old Country?"

"I was but for takin' wan," answered Shanigan, frowning. "Yet the words yez just used has struck a soft spot in me. It reminds me of me deceased mother and father who came from there. We'll have wan on the Old Country, Muldoon."

This finished, Muldoon's face took on a sad look.

"Would yez be havin' wan for me own folks that came from there, Shanigan?" he asked now.

"For mimories like thim, I'll have wan any

time, Muldoon."

So they drank again and began to talk. Muldoon filled the glasses once more and Shanigan, feeling a comfortable warmth, forgot his resolutions.

It was later, much later, after Muldoon had lighted three big oil lamps and after they had drunk to everything either could think of that was worthwhile, that they stood at the bar with arms around each other's shoulders. They had formed a friendship—a perfect friendship!

CHAPTER II

Shanigan's Fists

AT THIS time, when the new alliance had been formed, a drumming of hoofbeats sounded outside and stopped before Muldoon's place.

Saddles creaked, horses snorted, and into the place stamped eight loud-talking, laughing men. For the most part they wore flat-heeled boots, with dungarees stuck sloppily inside. Shirts were faded shades of grays and blues, darkened with sweat.

One of the newcomers, however, was a sharp-visaged, slender half-breed, wearing bell-bottom pants with conchos streaking the sides, a red silk shirt and a high-crowned sombrero. He entered with a man whose shoulders were so vast that the bull-dog face he possessed seemed small in comparison.

These two sidled up to the bar, somewhat apart from the others, and talked in low tones. They all called for whisky.

Muldoon, as steadily as he could, went about serving them. The half-breed smoothed his thick black mustache and asked Muldoon how he was fixed for wine.

"I got enough for another week, Carillo," answered the saloon-owner. "Maybe then I'll be gittin' more."

The half-breed nodded and, after downing his drink, left the place.

Muldoon filled the glasses of the others for another round and then going back to Shanigan, leaned close.

"Them are some of the gints that are tunnelin' the railroad and a tough lot they are, too," he whispered. "Always they come in with a wild look in their eyes. Sometimes it's me, Muldoon, who sez they're buyin' and takin' some of the dope that's bein' peddled around here. The Mexican lad who left, he's all right. He makes and sells wine to the railroad and to anybody else who wants it. It's good stuff Pedro Carillo peddles, too. That gent with the big shoulders he was talkin' to is Joe Fenton. He's foreman of the gang. You wouldn't believe it, but I seen him bend a spike wit' me own sight I did."

Shanigan, dreamy-eyed, nodded, and answered in a voice that he meant to be soft, but which in reality was loud enough to be heard in the room.

"I recall, Muldoon, it's the smugglin' goin' on down here that's got the Rangers tearin' their hair out," he said. "Maybe if they worked on some of this railroad crowd they might find out somethin'."

As he spoke these words, the man with the bulldog face, Joe Fenton, lifted his head and gave Shanigan a sharp look. Now he pushed away from the bar and, turning, stepped closer to the Ranger.

"You made a remark that I ain't takin' to," he said. "You can't talk about dope and smugglin' and link the railroad crew with it, 'cause I ain't takin' it. I been noticin' you got a Ranger's badge on you, but that don't say you can go talkin' 'bout gents unless you can back it up. Savvy? Someone ought to close that loose mouth of yours for you."

Shanigan slowly straightened and faced the man, in whose eyes he could see a wild brightness.

"'Tis the words I said that maybe hit the bell in your conscience," he retorted. "Could that be it?"

The other laborers had broken off their conversation and now formed behind the one confronting the Ranger. Their faces took on scowls while their attitudes became threatening.

"Meanin' that I got somethin' to do with it?" continued Fenton.

"Maybe yez have, at that," retorted Shanigan. While he talked, the dreamy, vacuous look had gone from his gaze and a slight flush on his face disappeared, as he threw off the effect of his drinks and became alert.

Fenton suddenly bared his teeth.

"The Rangers ain't no good, see!" he snarled. "I never seen a Mick who was any good, either." Shifting his feet slightly, he hammered a crushing blow at Shanigan with all his weight behind it. That fist of the foreman's landed on the square bulge of Shanigan's big chin.

Then Fenton stepped back with a wave of his powerful arm.

"Look out, boys, give him room to fall!" he said. "He's big and he'll hit heavy."

A tremendous shudder went through Shanigan's body. His eyes, for seconds, became filmed and glassy. He swayed slightly. But now the quiver of his body stopped and life jumped into his eyes once more.

"He ain't fallin', Joe, an' he ain't gonna fall," one of the graders said.

"He's gonna hit the sawdust," Fenton growled savagely. "Any of you gents know that I only has to press the button once to put an hombre's lights out!"

Shanigan's voice came almost sleepily to Muldoon who was staring at him in open-mouthed wonder.

"He insulted me, Clancy!"

"That he did, Shanigan, but, hey, lad. What a sock that was! Are yez all right or are yez talkin' in your sleep?"

"He insulted the Irish and called me a Mick," went on Shanigan.

"Shure, shure, he did that," intoned Muldoon.

"And he said the Rangers wuz no good," went on Shanigan.

MULDOON also was beginning to come out of his trance.

"Anybody who insults you or the Rangers insults me, too," he snapped viciously. His hand went under the bar for a gun. That was when Shanigan's voice turned into a thunder.

"Stay out of it, Muldoon," he ordered, and he struck out at Joe Fenton, just as the other, getting over his incredulous surprise at seeing Shanigan still on his feet, set himself to hit Shanigan again. But he was too late.

It is hard to say how fast the arm and fist of Shanigan's moved. It was perhaps like the lightning snap of a wolf's fangs, as he drifts up on a running deer and hamstrings it. Or rather somewhat like the snapping lash of a whip.

The blow started from his shoulder, went slightly upward, then smashed down like a club. Fenton tried to jerk his head backward to save himself and he did, maybe, save himself a broken skull.

As it was, the Ranger's fist slashed down across his forehead, nose and chin, turning his face instantly into a blob of red and driving Fenton almost to his knees.

While he was in that squatting position, Shanigan's left fist smashed him in the chest and hurled him, with a shrieking yell of pain, backward along the floor until he crashed into the wall where he lay still.

Now the Ranger turned slightly as, with a yell, one of the foreman's men dived in at him, the others following. A backward swing of Shanigan's arm caught the first man in the throat, flipping him backward to crash onto a table, which splintered like matchwood. Another the Ranger grabbed by his belt front and neck and tossed over the bar.

The man's body hit the shelf holding the liquor bottles and tumbled to the floor, the bottles and shelf following. Then a chair whizzed past Shanigan's head, hit the big mirror behind the bar and splintered it. Another chair came through the air that Shanigan caught and tossed right back at its sender, the chair nearly taking the fellow's head off.

Through it all Muldoon leaned on the bar and kept muttering over and over.

"Sure, only a Pat Shanigan could do such a grand job. 'Tis the best brawl I've seen in ten years."

Muldoon ducked as a third chair came whizzing by and mowed down what was left of the bottles on a rear shelf. One of Shanigan's fists connected with another fighter's face, dropping the fellow like a sack of potatoes.

A man leaped on the Ranger's back, encircling his throat with one arm trying for a strangle hold. That arm was taken in a grip of iron, pulled straight out. Bending slightly, Shanigan hurled him through the air against two tables, the legs broke, letting the table tops fall on his senseless body.

The last of the laborers, whose face was now contorted in fear, tried to duck past Shanigan and head for the swinging doors. But the Ranger's vast hand reached out, took him by the neck while his other hand reached for the slack of his pants.

Lifting him, Shanigan gave him a heave and sent him flying through the doorway, just as one of the batwings opened and a tall man was about to step in. The laborer's body hit him solidly and sent him backward with a grunt of gasping breath. Then both of them toppled into the dust of the road.

The newcomer flung off the one whose body had hit him, leaped to his feet and came charging into Muldoon's. In the center of the floor stood Shanigan, head drooping, his big chest heaving like a bellows as he gasped

for air. Muldoon was just coming around the end of the bar when he slowed with a half-whispered groan.

"Hey, Shanigan!" he mumbled. "Buck up, me lad! It's Lieutenant Griffin, of the Rangers, yure commander!"

Shanigan managed to lift his head and straightened to attention. There was no sign of anger on Griffin's face, except for the fact that one eye was squinted and his lips were drawn partly back from his clenched teeth, behind which he now talked.

The Lieutenant always went into action this way, because long ago he had learned how to keep a check upon his temper. He ran his eyes up and down Shanigan's form and gestured with a hand to the half-torn clothes and the blood streaking his face.

"Are you a saloon bum who happened to get into a fight or are you really the Shanigan I heard Muldoon mention a minute ago?"

"I'm Shanigan, sir," muttered the Ranger.

"So you really arrived, did you?" continued Griffin. "And the first thing you had to do was get boiled and start a cyclone I could hear down in my office."

"Well, I wasn't really boiled, sir, and I wasn't just real sober. Yez see, I wuz insulted and nobody is gonna insult me or the Rangers whether I'm drunk or sober."

"Are you starting to give me an argument, Shanigan?"

"No, sir. Just facts."

"Let me see your credentials from Captain Williams?"

SHANIGAN dug into a pocket and brought them out. The Lieutenant glanced at them briefly.

"Listen, Shanigan," he said, with set jaw. "You were sent down here so I could ride herd on you for a while. Before I even have a chance to round you up, you start running wild. I've got enough trouble, Shanigan, see, enough of it, without you to make more. If all you think about the Rangers is to start in drinking, even before you report to me, then we don't want you in an outfit like ours. I'm ordering you to turn in all your equipment that belongs to us as soon as you can. Then I'm putting through your resignation. The reasons are drinking and fighting when under the influence of liquor. I know you've got your side of the story, but your record is enough, Shanigan. And another thing, there's no use going to Captain Williams or your uncle or anyone else. I've got my orders from them."

Lieutenant Griffin about-faced and walked out.

Shanigan sank wearily into a chair.

"Look, me bucko," soothed Muldoon. "There's them gents that yez half murdered draggin' themselves to their feet and Fenton there walkin' in circles and groanin' his lungs out. I'll get rid of thim and then yez come on upstairs to me livin' quarters. I got an extry bunk yez can have for as long as yez want it. Maybe the lieutenant will forgive yez whin yez see him tomorrow."

Muldoon went now to first one and then another of the laborers and not too gently showed them outside. Fenton, wiping the blood from his face with a bandanna, said nothing as he left with the others. A few seconds later they all rode away. Then Muldoon came in and led Shanigan upstairs, where he showed him a basin of water to wash his cuts and bruises. He also gave him some salve for them.

Shanigan, after cleaning up, threw himself on a bunk Muldoon showed him, while the saloon-owner went down to stable Shanigan's roan in a shed in the rear of the place.

The next morning after breakfast, Shanigan left Muldoon and strode down to the Rangers quarters, where he saw Lieutenant Griffin. Griffin's attitude had not changed. The necessary papers of resignation were signed and the ex-Ranger went back to Muldoon's. The saloon-owner was taking stock of things that had been broken and damaged.

After hearing what Shanigan had to say, he told the ex-Ranger it would take two or three weeks at least to have lumber brought in, including table and chairs, to have the place fixed up again. Also his stock of liquor was completely ruined. It would take time to bring this in.

"Yez know," said Muldoon, leaning with his back against the bar. "'Tis a vacation I need anyway, Shanigan, me bucko. I'll close this place up tight and down by the river there's a spot where we can idle away our time under a willow tree by the water. I been wantin' to stick out a fishin' line for a long time."

Shanigan asked Muldoon how much damage was done, but the saloon-owner brushed the question aside with a wave of his hand.

"'Tis not a cint yez'll be payin'. I wuz goin' to improve the place anyway and it wuz worth three times what it'll cost me to see yez in action. Come on, lad, I'll git me fish-

in'-pole and some bait and there'll be no time like the present to start our vacation."

It was a nice place on a grassy embankment that Muldoon picked out beside the water. A big willow partly leaned its head over the stream, giving them shade.

While Muldoon fished and talked of one thing or another, Shanigan moodily watched the ebb and flow of traffic that came over the wooden bridge a short distance away. Here two Rangers examined everyone that came across.

When traffic was slack, one or the other came from the small adobe shack that sheltered them and talked to Shanigan and Muldoon. They had heard of the ex-Ranger's trouble and spoke of it twice, but the second time Muldoon caught their eye and shook his head, so they did not mention the subject again.

A couple days passed while the ex-Ranger waited for word that his resignation had been accepted. Muldoon had sent his order to the nearest city for the things he needed.

CHAPTER III

Fight by the River

IT WAS one afternoon when he and Muldoon sat in their usual spot under the willow, the saloon-owner fishing, and Shanigan watching those coming and going across the bridge, that Shanigan felt more miserable than usual.

It had been going through Shanigan's mind that he was a disgrace not only to himself, but to everyone else. He had liked his good times and made plenty of trouble while he had them.

His uncle had been kind to him, forgiving him many times and had put himself out to get Shanigan in the Rangers. The old man had a great deal of pride and he and Shanigan had had a long talk before the retired captain had agreed to stand by him and help him become something, provided Shanigan mended his ways.

The Texas Rangers had been suggested by Shanigan's uncle. Shanigan had joined the Rangers and made a fool of himself in El Paso. Now sent out here, he had made a fool of himself again. But the more he thought of the whole thing, the more miserable it made him.

He turned and watched Muldoon's fishing-cork bobbing in the wrinkles of the water.

"Muldoon," he said at last. "Me mind is turnin' over and spinnin' like a top, with the thoughts of what I been doin'. I gotta stop drinkin', that's sure, but I'll be disgracin' meself worse than ever."

"And how is that?" asked Muldoon.

"Why, I won't be goin' into saloons to see me frinds or to be playin' cards. An' yez know the word that'll be goin' around, Muldoon? They'll say Shanigan had to stop drinkin' 'cause he couldn't take it like a man. It always got him into trouble. That's what they'll be a-savin', Clancy, and I'll sure not be goin' into a place and orderin' lemon sody or milk."

" 'Tis a problem yez have, me lad," answered Muldoon, shaking his head.

Shanigan nodded and absently watched a Mexican woman walk across the bridge bearing a big basket which balanced neatly upon her head. An old man came from the opposite direction, a yoke fitted to his neck like that of an ox, each end of it holding two pails.

Then a young dark-visaged fellow, with black, gleaming hair falling loosely to his shoulders, wearing a loose cotton shirt with cotton pants rolled to his brown knees, came toward the American side leading a big gray horse dappled all over with small black patches.

On either side of the animal were lashed two big baskets filled with straw and sticking out of this Shanigan could see the necks of bottles.

"Now there's a horse," he said, perking up. " 'Tis a horse that could support me two hundred pounds without tryin', I'd say."

Muldoon glanced up.

"That he could, Shanigan. It's Pedro Carillo's dappled gray. Young he is and full of fire and fully as big as your roan. The Mexican lad leadin' him by the halter is a peon who works for Carillo deliverin' his wine. And by the way, Shanigan, it reminds me of somethin'. Whisky and beer don't seem to be in the cards for yez. They boil your temper, But say, now, did yez ever try takin' wine?"

"That I niver did," said Shanigan.

"Then it's worth a try," said Muldoon, enthusiastically. "Maybe it'll have no more effect on yez than water an' yez can still walk into a place and be the man yez want to be."

"It's an idee, Muldoon. Now that I think of it, it might change me circumstances and me luck."

"I'll call the lad and see if I can git a coupla bottles," suggested Muldoon.

He gave a shout and with a wave of greeting the peon came over to them.

"Jose, is that wine yez have all ordered and bought up or can yes leave a couple of bottles?" asked Muldoon.

"Thees wan she's all take, Senor," replied the other. "But *mañana* I breeng two for thee Senor."

"Yez'll have to wait until tomorrow then, Shanigan," said Muldoon.

Shanigan, in the meantime, had been running his eyes over the legs of the dappled gray.

"This cayuse has got the bone all right," he said now. "Look at them legs, Muldoon. They'd carry me all day long."

The peon now took his departure. At dusk that evening they saw him go to the Mexican side and the following afternoon he stopped again by Muldoon and Shanigan. He had two bottles of blood-red wine, for them.

As Shanigan paid him, he again ran admiring eyes over the horse. To his question if the animal was for sale, the peon said that others wanted to buy the animal, but Carillo would not sell him.

When he left, Shanigan and Muldoon settled down to some drinking and after the bottles were emptied, both agreed that it wasn't enough to test Shanigan's capacity.

THE next day the peon stopped at Muldoon's hail and this time sold them four bottles which he could spare.

"If yez can drink them two without feelin' like fightin' or singin', Pat, me boy," said Muldoon, "ye'll know your the man yez want to be 'cause it's no more will ye take in a saloon if it's jist a couple of frindly hours yez want to spind there."

Shanigan nodded, reflectively, but his eyes were following the peon and the dappled gray who had gone on down the street.

"Maybe, Muldoon, the bottle I had yisterday might be a bit too much for me at that," he muttered. "The effect of it maybe stays with me longer than the other stuff."

"Now what do yez mane by that?" asked the other.

"We'll forgit it for the time bein'," answered Shanigan and proceeded to open the wine bottles.

Muldoon and he made good use of the first one and began on the second they each possessed. When these were half gone, Muldoon's eyes occasionally would close and his head would bow forward as he began to doze. But Shanigan began to hum a tune. His face was flushed and he began to talk under his breath. When he started this, Muldoon turned to him.

"That's a new wan," he said. "It makes yez talk to yerself. But yez don't feel like fightin', do yez?"

"No, but I want yez to do somethin' for me. Whin that gent comes back with the dappled gray, git him away from here for a spell whin I give yez the wink. But be sure he don't take his horse with him."

" 'Tis loony I think yez are, Shanigan, but I'll do what yez say. Would it be too much if I asked what was on yure mind?"

"I'll tell yez later, Muldoon."

So it was when the Mexican youth returned, Muldoon called him and began to talk about giving Carillo an order for wine when he re-opened his place. Suddenly he saw Shanigan wink.

"Leave yure horse here, me lad," Muldoon said then. "I want yez to come over with me to my place till I check up on jist how much wine I'll be needin'."

The boy nodded.

"Sure, I'll watch the horse," Shanigan said. "Don't worry about it."

When they had gone, Shanigan muttered: "I do be thinkin' the stuff is makin' me see things, but I'll find out soon enough."

He led the animal behind the base of the willow, where prying eyes could not see them so well.

When Muldoon and the peon returned, Shanigan was squatting on the grass, while the horse grazed nearby. They spoke to the Mexican a bit more and then he took his departure.

"Well, give out, Shanigan, me bucko," Muldoon said. "What's it all about?"

"I don't think I will at that," answered Shanigan. "I made yez a heap of trouble already and I ain't gonna make yez no more. I thought I wuz beginnin' to lose me mind, but I found out that I ain't. But begorra, I come so close to thinkin' I wuz that, Muldoon, I'm gonna lay off the stuff—I don't care what anybody thinks."

" 'Tis a stubborn-headed mule yez are not to tell me, Shanigan, but have it yure way." And Muldoon went about baiting his hook once more.

It was later that night that Shanigan lay awake in his bunk at Muldoon's place and

stared through the window at a punched-in half-moon whipping in and out of scudding clouds.

At times a shaft of the light climbed along the room and touched on the clock that ticked away nearby. Shanigan saw that it was near midnight.

He sat up and turned his head slightly to make sure he could hear Muldoon's heavy breathing that came from a curtained room nearby. Satisfied that the other was asleep, he quietly pulled on his pants, boots and shirt. From the back of a chair he took his gun-belt, holding his holstered forty-five and buckled it around his waist. Now he tiptoed through the doorway and down the hall to the rear, where another portal led to a balcony.

Shanigan went down the steps to the rear yard and made his way to a shed where the horses were kept. He quickly saddled and bridled the roan and, mounting, rode into a fringe of trees.

Once away from Muldoon's place, he sent the roan along a gulley at a good clip. In casual conversation, he had led Muldoon to explain where the White Tree Crossing was. Shanigan cut over until he could see the gleam of the Rio and followed on.

At the end of two miles, he finally saw the big tree that lay along the embankment showing white in the moonlight where the weather and lightning when it had been struck had stripped it of its bark.

COMING close to it, he left the roan in a brush-covered arroyo and walked the rest of the way on foot. Reaching the tree, he went along until he found a place beside it that could give him cover and keep him hidden. From here he could look out and see the dark line of the sand-bar that showed in the water. Shanigan settled himself and began his vigil.

The moon still played its game of hide and seek with the clouds. Perhaps fifteen minutes went by when off in the vicinity to his left he thought he heard the slight crackle of twigs and the scraping of leaves.

He strained his eyes to see what he could, but a heavy growth of trees and brush prevented him from discovering anything. He had no fear that the roan would whinny if another horse came close, as the animal had been trained not to make a sound. Shanigan heard no more, but kept alert and waiting with an Indian's patience.

Suddenly splashes reached his ears off in the direction of the Mexico side. As he kept watching, he gradually saw the dim forms of two horsemen taking shape. They came closer and now Shanigan could distinguish one of the animals they rode as one that looked like the dappled gray.

A shadow seemed to move to Shanigan's left beyond the White Tree. Shifting his gaze, the ex-Ranger saw a man appear, come toward him and then swerve when near and go down the embankment to stand at the water's edge. He waved to the two horsemen crossing over and what impressed Shanigan mostly was that the fellow wore a white mask.

The two horsemen finally reached the masked man and dismounted with low greetings.

Shanigan's gun was in his hand, as he slid out from hiding and slipped cautiously toward the men who were talking in low tones.

The moon, as if to see the proceedings, had been out for some minutes. Then Shanigan called out a command:

"Stick your paws into the air, gents, till I see what yez are up to!"

Startled, the men swung around.

"We're cornered, but I'll get him," a voice yelled in English.

This was answered in Spanish.

"Not the gun, you fool! She makes too much the noise. I use the knife!"

But a gun roared, spitting yellow flame and a bullet sang past Shanigan's ear. At the same time a knife made a glittering arc in the moonlight. He heard the hiss of this as it missed. The gun roared again sending more lead whining past him.

Shanigan fired at the flash of the explosion, but knew he had missed. Another knife glittered through the air, hit him and sent red fire tearing into his left shoulder. He saw the sagging hilt of it imbedded in the tendons and muscles.

The blow of the knife had staggered him and sent him off balance, but he managed to send a shot that brought a scream from one of the trio who tottered to one side and fell.

Another one began to moan wildly for the saints to preserve him and cried out that he wanted no trouble with any *Americanos*. Turning, he ran madly back through the shallow water and across the sand-bar until he became a fleeting uncertain shadow in the moonlight.

The last of the three lanced flame at Shanigan who felt the lead sear across his ribs.

Then the man jumped toward the dappled gray which had moved a short distance off and stood with upflung head.

Leaping into the saddle, the man sent the horse up the slope of the embankment and away from Shanigan in full flight. The ex-Ranger fired twice more, but in the uncertain moonlight, he saw that he had failed to hit his quarry.

CHAPTER IV

The Water-Wagon

SUDDENLY, from the shadow of some brush, a figure rose up beside the running horse and Shanigan saw the animal's rider suddenly pitch to the side and out of the saddle. He hit the ground and lay still. The well-trained and seemingly unfearing horse slowed, stopped, then turning, waited.

Shanigan started to walk toward the person who had toppled the rider from the horse.

"Yez seem to be workin' with me, but sing out who yez are or I'll put a slug through yez, I'm that mad!" the former ranger called out.

The answering voice was that of Muldoon, who came to meet Shanigan.

"Put up yer gun, Pat, me boy, the thing is done with," Muldoon said. "So yez thought I wuz asleep, hey, and yez could sneak out on me. Yez thought I didn't git suspicious whin yez asked me where White Tree Crossin' wuz? Well, it'll take a smarter Irishman than ye to put anything over on Clancy Muldoon, me bucko! I followed yez and came just in time to finish up the little party yez started, it looks like. Here, let's see that shoulder!"

Shanigan pulled out the knife and tossed it to the ground. Muldoon ripped open Shanigan's shirt and, taking a bandanna from his pocket, padded it over the wound. Then he bandaged it with rags made from Shanigan's shirt-sleeve.

"There," said Muldoon, at last. "It ain't too bad or bleedin' much and it ought to do till we git back to Amigo. There's a Mexican there who is a good doctor."

"Sure, an' it don't feel so bad at all," muttered Shanigan. "But, come on, we'll have a look at our night owls. That's the thing I'm wantin' to do now."

They went over to the fellow Shanigan had shot and found him groaning and tossing. It was Muldoon who again made an examination.

"Well, Shanigan, if it ain't me frind, Carillo," Muldoon said.

"It's him, sure enough," agreed the ex-Ranger.

Muldoon scanned the wound which had darkened the Mexican's shirt with blood.

"It feels like he's got a coupla broken ribs but he ain't bleedin' so much. He'll probably hold out until we git him back to town. Let's look at the other wan that I whanged over the head with me gunbarrel."

At the place where Muldoon had dropped him, they found the man, still unconscious. The moonlight showed plainly on his features, revealing the railroad foreman, Joe Fenton.

"Yez remimber seein' him, Shanigan?" asked Muldoon.

"I do that. And what's this here thing stickin' out of the pocket of his coat?"

Shanigan pulled a small package wrapped in brown paper into view. He ripped off the covering and brought to light a box. Lifting the top, both could see that it was filled with small objects. Shanigan broke one between his fingers.

"Dope!" muttered Muldoon, excitedly. "As sure as anything yez want to be. It's part of the poppy plant they are! An' git the smell of 'em. Opium, sure enough! I've seen and smelled the stuff before."

"Right yez are," admitted Shanigan, "I did meself. Plenty of the stuff can be made from these here. But, hey, who is this comin'?"

A flutter of hoofs was rapidly drawing near them, until from the shadow of the trees a short distance away, three horsemen broke out into the moonlight. Six-guns gleamed in their hands! Shanigan and Muldoon brought Colts into their own fists.

"Drop those guns, gents, or eat lead!" one of the riders ordered, loudly. "What's the shootin' all about?"

"Begorra, it's Lieutenant Griffin himself!" shouted Muldoon and holstered his gun, Shanigan following the movement. "Hey, Lieutenant!" went on the saloon-owner, as the three men came up. "It's me an' Shanigan and we've got somethin' here yez might want to see. We got Joe Fenton, the railroad construction foreman. That other hombre groanin' over there is Pedro Carillo. One of Shanigan's slugs busted a couple of his ribs. And

here's somethin' Shanigan found in Fenton's pocket. 'Tis nothin' else but thim things they call pods from the poppy plant that opium is made from."

Griffin, with his two men, had dismounted and stood appraising the situation. At once, the Lieutenant took the box Shanigan proffered and with the aid of a dark lantern one of his men possessed, examined the contents.

"Poppy capsules," said the Lieutenant at last. "This is the real stuff it's made from." Then to his men: "Take your lariats and tie up Fenton and that half-breed Carillo. And you, Muldoon or Shanigan, tell me about this piece of business.

"I guess Shanigan can do the talkin'," replied Muldoon. "It wuz his party yez might say. I only come in at the last of it to smack Fenton out of the saddle of the dappled gray horse grazin' over there that he was makin' a getaway on."

GRIFFIN'S men finished tying the half-breed and carried him over near the others. Fenton had struggled to a sitting position, but before he could move further, the two Rangers made a quick job of tying him also.

"Well, let's hear about this thing, Shanigan," Griffin said again. "Suppose you do the talking. I'm glad I took to patrolling nights. I'm kind of lucky."

"I'll tell yez what I know, Lieutenant, but yez might say me drinkin' started it all."

Griffin gasped. "Your drinking!"

"'Twas that, sir, but right now I'm as clear-headed as the chime of a bell. 'Twas whin I took me first drink in Muldoon's that it began, yez might say. That one led to more and the first thing I talked louder thin I should have. It started me fightin' with Fenton and his men and we wrecked Muldoon's place. The end of it made me an ex-Ranger and put me and Muldoon under a willow tree to pass away the time. If we hadn't been there, Muldoon maybe niver would have called the peon to git the wine and I niver would have seen the dapple gray's legs close enough to examine them, I guess. And maybe I would niver have noticed that it wasn't there the first time, but was there the second time. Thin the third time it was gone and that's what got me suspicions up."

"Shanigan!" said the Lieutenant. "You're saying a lot but telling me nothing. What was there and then wasn't? What made you suspicious?"

"Shure, Shanigan, talk sense will yez," added Muldoon.

"If yez will give me a chance to git goin', I'll move," growled Shanigan. "So I was sittin' under the tree and whin I did git me suspicions up, Lieutenant, I got Muldoon to take the peon away for a spell, while I kept the horse and examined him. Thin, begorra, I saw it again."

"Yes, yes, you saw it again!" broke in the Lieutenant, irritably. "Shanigan, *what* did you see?"

"Why, sir, three black spots whin there should have only been two, as I noticed before. It sort of matched the other little patches that nature had put on the horse on the inside of his leg, the right foreleg up near the chest. And it wuz circumstances and luck and me wantin' a drink that brought about me findin' the thing."

"And what did you find, Shanigan?" asked the Lieutenant with deliberate slowness.

"I found out, sir, that this spot that I noticed was one of the funniest things I ever did see. It was made of tar and soft enough from the horse's body keepin' it warm that I could pull it from the leg. And there, under it, what do yez think there wuz?"

"What?" intoned Griffin. "What was it, Shanigan?"

"Why, a piece of paper rolled up thinner thin a cigarette. Whin I opened it, I seen words that said tonight at White Tree Crossin' at twelve. So I rolled it up again and stuck it back with the tar. Not wantin' Muldoon to have any more trouble thin I already give him, I sneaked out here alone, without tellin' him, and saw Fenton, Carillo an' that lad Jose, what works for him and who beat it back to the Mexican side, all meet. I told thim to stick up their hands and the fight started. Carillo I shot and Fenton was about to git away whin Muldoon came from nowhere and shillalahed him. After that, Lieutenant, ye came along and know the rest."

"Well, I'll be shillalahed meself!" burst out the saloon-owner. "What do yez think of that, Lieutenant?"

"You did a fine piece of work, Shanigan," said Griffin. "Fenton and Carillo are caught with the goods. They'll do a nice long stretch."

It was Joe Fenton who now spoke.

"All right, I'm caught with the stuff, see," he snarled. "But Carillo figured out the whole thing. He grew the stuff and I spread it

around to be used by anybody anyway they wanted to take it as long as they paid hard cash for it. We split the profits. But it was Carillo's idea, see. I ain't a squealer, but I'm only goin' to serve time for the part I did and no more."

"The court will decide that," answered Griffin. "But as long as you're so willing to talk, where does this peon, Jose, fit in?"

"He don't. The kid didn't know a thing about it. Me and Carillo figured to send messages to each other by usin' tar to look like a patch that matched the others on the horse an' puttin' it where it couldn't be found easy. If Jose was caught, we could find out in time to make a getaway. Tonight we were gonna let him carry this package of opium over to my shack at the railroad and meet him there later. He'd be the sucker if he was found with the stuff on him. Me and Carillo had decided not to trust any other man but ourselves. That's why we didn't send the messages word of mouth or by letters."

WHEN Shanigan heard him say this, he nodded his head vigorously.

" 'Tis right he probably is about that Jose," he said. "If he wasn't, the lad would niver have left his horse with me. That shows that he knew nothin' 'bout the goings-on."

"All right," said Griffin. "We'll let Jose rest unless we need him and then we can get in touch with the Mexican authorities. Right now we'll get Fenton and Carillo back to jail and to a doctor. I see you're bandaged, too, Shanigan. Anything bad?"

"Nothin' to bother me, sir," answered Shanigan. "But, say, there's wan thing I'd like to know. Might it be possible to git the dapple gray 'cause he's got the legs to carry me weight and it's thim I wuz lookin' at whin I found the trickery of Fenton an' Carillo."

"We'll see if that can be arranged," answered Griffin. "And Shanigan I'm also going to arrange for your reinstatement into the Rangers."

"Sure, and that will gladden me heart, sir."

"And now that I think of it," said Muldoon, "maybe if I look hard enough, I might find a bottle of liquor left in me place to celebrate the occasion."

"That celebration will be on me, Muldoon," said Griffin. "I've got a couple of bottles of choice California wine in my desk."

"And I'm tellin' yez both that I'm through wit' the stuff, and I don't care what people say or think," said Shanigan. "Lieutenant an' Muldoon, I'm sorry I can't accipt yure invitation."

"Fine—that's fine, Shanigan!" replied Lieutenant Griffin. "I'd rather have it that way, if you must know. And now, boys, let's get going."

Muldoon got his horse from where he had hidden him, as did Shanigan. They used the dappled gray to carry Carillo tied in the saddle and Fenton, with his ankles lashed under the animal's belly, riding behind him and showing his willingness to keep the half-breed in the saddle as best he could. Fenton's and the peon's horses had taken to flight.

They hadn't proceeded far, when Shanigan rode up beside the Lieutenant.

"Lieutenant, sir, there's somethin' I'd like to tell yez," he said, with a tone of sadness in his voice. "With me givin' up drinkin', me conduct I know will be perfect. But, sir, I'm afraid from now on me record's goin' to be somethin' terrible."

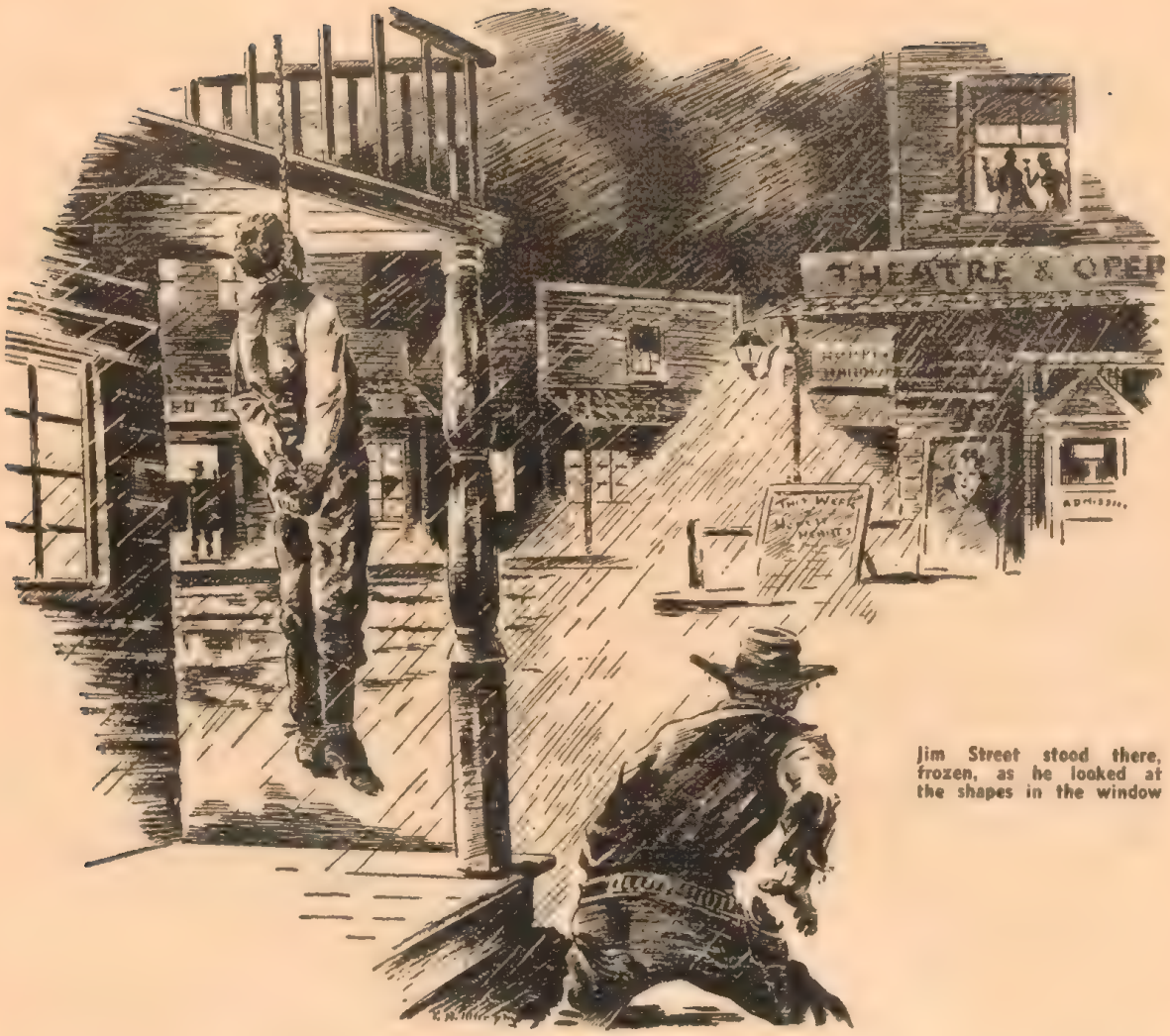
Lieutenant Griffin didn't answer, as he was using all his powers to control a burst of laughter that suddenly threatened to well up from his throat.

Tired Kidneys Often Bring Sleepless Nights

Doctors say your kidneys contain 15 miles of tiny tubes or filters which help to purify the blood and keep you healthy. When they get tired and don't work right in the daytime, many people have to get up nights. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder. Don't neglect this condition and lose valuable, restful sleep.

When disorder of kidney function permits poisonous matter to remain in your blood, it may also cause nagging backache, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, a stimulant diuretic, used successfully by millions for over 40 years. Doan's give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from your blood. Get Doan's Pills. (Adv.)



Jim Street stood there, frozen, as he looked at the shapes in the window

THE HANGROPE AND THE WOMAN

By SEYMOUR IRVING RICHIN

When hard-eyed gambler Jim Street finds his brother lynched, he brings some classic justice to bear on a duo of schemers!

MEN without women—here was the most savage curse inflicted by a whim of nature upon the gold-mad placer miners who heaved their picks into the slag and ash of Sun Mountain, sun-dial of the desert, towering eight thousand feet above the sea, the loftiest point of the forbidding Washoe Range. Men without women—more dangerous than the threat of murder, Piute attack, the swift rush of ravenous wolves, starvation, and the elusive, maddening Lady Luck who lured them from the ends of the earth, more dangerous to their souls and sanity was their loneliness. Men without women!

Men without love—it was no wonder.

Blockaded by the searing wastes of Forty Mile desert and, during the winter months, by the white, enormous silence of the snow and ice-locked Sierra, the woman was rare who would make the Washoe journey. They came, a handful did, but mostly they were

bad, the criminal runaways, the human castoffs. . . . But still, the magic of the yellow metal lured them on, these miners, by the thousands, and the savage Washoe taught them its lesson soon.

Bitter, lonely, beastialized, they spent their drunken passion in the few, broken down dancehouses and the dark, tiny rooms above and went home to dream of wives—thousands of men haunted by a woman's laughter. Men without women. Men filled with hate. In the Washoe, men who liked living harmed no women. In the Washoe a lynch-mob could build quickly. . . .

* * * * *

Jim Street stared up at the body of his brother, swinging in the rain. The hanged man swayed from side to side like a pendulum, ticking off seconds he had not lived to see. There was wind. Swirls of rain swept in gusts down the mud-rutted Johntown road, blowing down from the Sun Mountain buttes. Raindrops hit the dead man's boots and became gleaming, twisting clusters. Slowly, the wind ebbed. The lynched youth seemed awkwardly asleep. His head lay on one shoulder like a musician cradling a violin. There was peace on his face and his hands hung quietly.

"Ed," Jim Street whispered. "Gosh, Ed." Then bitterly, "Where were your friends?"

He couldn't say any more. He could only stare.

He was tall, about twenty-seven, with a deep chest, powerful hands and alert, strong-boned face. His lips were wide and full and his love for the sting of life was in the quick whiteness of his smile. He was not smiling now. His eyes had a wild gleam.

HE DID not feel the lash of the rainy wind nor the black-flying clouds against the stars. He was thinking that what he was seeing was, somehow, a lie. Ed wasn't up there. Dead. Hanged. Not Ed. Not his friendly, scholarly kid brother who'd triumphantly written him of his discovery, made after months of experimentation in his Gold Canyon laboratory.

"Blue gold, Jim!" His letter had burned with enthusiasm. "There's enough blue gold here in the Washoe to make a Forty-niner forget the name of California. I can't tell you any more. It would be madness to trust a letter. And I'm in enough danger as it is. Any man with a discovery such as this has his life hanging by a thread.

"I'm no loner like you, Jim. Like always, I made friends easy and bein' neighborly sure paid off. A couple of theatre-people in Johntown staked me to food and equipment. They're my partners now.

"Make tracks out of Placerville pronto. We need to be together now. The blue gold is a bigger pot than anything you ever shuffled a deck for. Hurry. You'll find me living at the Johntown Hotel . . ."

Living at the Johntown Hotel. Jim Street reflected bitterly that he'd found him at the hotel all right—hanging from the wooden balcony railing with his boots ten feet off the earth.

"Your friends. Where were your friends?"

Street scowled. What had Ed discovered? He had no doubt that his brother had been murdered for his secret. A man just didn't die conveniently like this. Not by a long shot. Not when he knew what Ed had known. "Blue gold." He frowned, puzzled.

The hangrope drew his eye then, and he shuddered. He stared at it. The rope was a muddy brown welt on his brother's throat and the hangknot bulged under his ear like knuckles in a fist. Huge knuckles. There was something relentless, something savage, a kind of living fury in the rope.

"Friends," Street muttered and he spat. His eyes narrowed. Pale gray and flecked with yellow, they were eyes which had known gun and knife play. Cold eyes. In his wild, gambler's life, he had seen too much treachery to hold much trust in his fellows; he had the look of a man who watches every card in the deck and the gent's sleeve besides.

"Boot hill's full of fellers whose friends passed them the dead man's hand," he'd once told Ed. "A man's best friend don't walk on two feet. And that holds for women, too. The only woman I trust is Lady Luck."

A mirthless smile curved his lips as he stared at the hangknot. Always, he had been the wild one of the Street brothers. Folks had said he ought to be more friendly, like Ed, and quit bein' a loner. The way he lived he wouldn't have a friend to pray over his tombstone. That's what they'd all said. Sure!

A gust of wind came out of the rainy dark suddenly and danced his brother's body around like a marionette.

That drove hate deeper into him. Slowly he drew his Bowie from a belt-sheath and

moved to cut his brother down. The Bowie paused, suddenly.

Across the road, he saw the man and the beautiful woman, outlined in the upstairs window of the Johntown Theatre. He stared at them unbelievingly. Then wrath convulsed his features, brightened the wildness in his eyes.

An amber splash of light limned their shadows on the window, as distinct as the ace of spades on a pasteboard. They were holding thin-stemmed glasses. Twice, Street saw them drink toasts—drink to the swinging body in the rain.

He stood there, frozen. He used every curse he knew on them, hate scorching his chest like flame. He saw the woman's beauty, rare in this man-society of placer-miners. Her body was silhouetted like a painting against the gleaming glass, graceful and provocative.

HE DARTED into the road, one long arm stabbing for a large rock, imbedded there, and crouched.

Again he glanced upward at the shadowy shapes in the window, closer together now. The woman was tipping liquor into her mouth, one delicate arm gesturing at the hanged man. The man who held her looked gay.

"You!" Street said.

With one fluid motion he scooped up the rock and hurled it at the window. Too late. The woman saw the rock spin toward her. He heard her strident shout as the liquor glass pitched out of her hand. The shadows vanished. The window turned all yellow.

Then the rock shattered its way into the room. Shards of glass sprayed everywhere and tinkling echoes were caught by the wind and flung into the night.

Street kept moving. He found the door of the theatre and booted it open.

"So a couple of theatre people staked you, eh Ed?" he muttered. "Let's cut this deck a little deeper."

The door swung shut behind him, cutting off the sound of the downpour. He walked carefully into the dark of the theatre, his fingers poised over his black-butted Colt .45.

Faint sounds came to him. He heard the dull pound of footsteps on stairs and tried to determine how many persons there were. Three, at least—coming from the upstairs room. The Colt was cold under his palm.

He glanced around the theatre. Ahead, the stage was dimly illuminated, by a row of lamps, set on the floorboards in evenly spaced, green cabbage-leaf sconces. A heavy black piano and stool stood near the left wing, a vase of red and yellow flowers was set on the piano. The rest of the stage was bare, except for two buffalo lances, hung, polished and gleaming, on the backdrop.

Street moved down the murky aisle and vaulted onto the high stage. He sat down at the piano and wrinkled the keyboard lightly with one hand. The wrinkle stopped abruptly. He glared at a beautiful blond woman's smiling portrait, beside the flower vase. He recognized her at once.

"So you toast the dead, eh lady?" he said viciously, and read the inscription with thinning lips.

To Jonathan
All my love
Belle

"If you want to live, Mr. Street, get out of Washoe," a soft voice whispered suddenly.

The girl surprised him, her voice, her approach. She had come from the other wing and stood almost in its shadow.

The piano stool whirred as he leaped erect and faced her. She was dark-haired, with the most frightened eyes he had ever seen in his life. She stared in the direction of the footsteps, still far off, coming at a run.

"Who are you?" Street asked. "How do you know my name? Who told you to say this?"

The footsteps would not leave them alone long. She knew it. Her hands clenched.

"I'm Ruth Carter," she said. "I knew your brother. He told me you'd arrive in Johntown today. I couldn't stand by and do nothing, no matter how Miss Belle threatens me. I can't let them arrange another murder." She shuddered.

"*Another* murder!" Street sucked in a breath.

"Go away," she said. She was breathless. "Please! Leave Johntown."

"Who killed my brother?" His question was harsh, grim.

"Go away. Can't you realize I'm your friend?"

STREET was about to speak bitterly on the subject of friendship, but something new in his mind—in her clear eyes, pleading

so fiercely, in the fright she would not yield to—stopped him. He tried to ignore her, but it was no use. Not with her. He was deeply disturbed. Then the picture of a human marionette on a rope in the rain flashed through his memory and his face hardened again.

"You got somethin' to say," he said. "It's in your eyes. Say it."

"Go away."

"Is that all?"

"That's all."

"That isn't all," Street said. He moved to her, caught her wrists with two fast hands and drew her violently to him. "There's a man on a rope I remember, savvy? Tell what you know."

She shook her head. Her dark hair swayed. Her face was white.

"Go away. You fool, they're coming fast! You don't know what I'm risking. I'm your friend."

"My friends don't walk on two feet!" Street said passionately. "Talk! There's murder in me."

"You'll die like he died," she moaned. "Without a chance."

"Who killed him?"

The pounding footsteps were near now. "Let me go!" She twisted desperately in his grasp. "Please!"

"Why should I?" Street asked. "Why should I care about anybody?"

"They're almost here. Creel and his awful bodyguard, Garth. And that blond devil." She shuddered, and fought his grasp madly. "They'll kill us both if they find out I warned you. Let me go!"

Street didn't let her go.

"This Creel hombre," he murmured. "He built that hangnoose?" Then he tried a long shot. "For the blue gold?"

She stiffened. Her body trembled. "You fool!" she said.

The pounding footsteps came out on the stage. Street let her go and twisted around. His right hand dropped low.

The blond woman led the way. A huge tough followed her leisurely, and leaned his massive weight against the piano—Garth. His face and skull were hairless and a lip-red color. Long ago, a fire had seared his features into their different cast. He would never shave. His light blue eyes, undefined by brows, glittered strangely in his scarred face. He drew a dagger from a belt sheath and spun it up into the air again and again, catching it neatly by the hilt. His hand was enormous. He grinned evilly at Street.

"You threw that stone?" the blonde said.

"Uh-huh," dourly, from Street. He recognized her from the photograph on the piano. He felt the impact of her beauty and hated himself for it.

She was tall, statuesque, with thick, wheat-colored hair. Her yellow satin dress molded her body provocatively—but he sensed her hardness and noted the cynical twist of her lips. She stood there contemptuously, staring at the girl.

"I told you to stay in my dressing-room, Ruth." Her voice was savage. "You know the punishment for disobeying me! What were you doing here with him!"

"Fighting me off." Street saw the dark-haired girl's frozen, wide-eyed fright and spoke up rapidly. "Reckon I reached for the wrong girl."

The blonde considered that for a moment, thoughtfully tapping one golden slipper on the floorboards. "In the Washoe a man doesn't touch a woman the wrong way and live, stranger," she said. "This is a territory of men without women. It's easier to get away with murder."

Street shrugged. "Live and learn."

"Sometimes that little lesson kills you," the flame-faced man said. His dagger kept cutting gleaming capers in the stage-light. "Savvy? There's more'n five hundred men here for every piece of calico." His livid scar of face split as he laughed.

"Why didn't you scream, Ruth?" the blonde asked.

"She was scared," Street said.

"Doesn't she talk for herself?" the blonde demanded.

"I—I was scared," Ruth whispered.

The blonde grimaced and told her to get out. Ruth fled into the right wing darkness.

THERE was a brief silence. Subconsciously Street noticed that the rain-sounds were gone from the night and the street outside was alive with raucous miner's voices and the stamp of hobnailed feet. With slitted eyes he watched the flame-faced man spin the knife as a tall man moved out of the left wing onto the stage—Jonathan Creel.

"When a man hangs, why the celebration?" Street asked the tall actor acidly.

Creel was darkly handsome, light on his feet, built along the lean, hard muscled lines of a boxer. He had bright, square teeth and

his dark hair gleamed with grease. He used it off the stage as well. He behaved always as though he were in a spotlight on a stage. He had a stagey manner and an arrogant carriage.

"Who are you?" Creel said.

So far as Street could see, the actor was unarmed and he felt a rush of wrath through him.

"Jim Street," he said.

"Street!" The blonde's painted lips twisted. She shivered.

"Cold?" Street said. He gave her a penetrating glance.

She amazed him by a warm smile. She moved closer, aiming her body at his eyes like she'd had a lot of practise and had never missed her man. Street watched her wonderingly, suspiciously. This meant trouble. He could tell that from the graven impassivity of Creel's face.

"You don't thrill me, lady," Street said in lazy tones. "You don't even come close."

A flicker of amusement came into his gray-yellow eyes as he watched her change. Hard lines grooved her cheeks. Her face grew cold with hate. She froze and kicked viciously at her satin skirt.

"Blue gold is all I'm interested in," Street told them. Then he stiffened, watching the three of them.

Garth's dagger chunked in his big palm. He sheathed it hurriedly and came carefully away from the piano, his massive shoulders hunched. Sweat glistened on his lip-red face. He stood tense and watchful.

"Mother of mercy!" the blonde whispered.

Creel licked his lips.

"My brother wrote me," Street said. "He mentioned his theatre 'friends,' too."

"Too," Creel said.

The shine of wildness came into Street's eyes.

"He told me about his discovery. Everything."

"He's not lying, Jon," the blonde said, breathing hard. "He must know. Ed did write him. He told me he was going to after he made the assay."

She quieted at Creel's suddenly uplifted hand. The tall actor stepped closer to Street, long legs flashing. Street noted his quickness and filed it carefully in his mind. This man could move in a hurry and would take watching. Following Creel closely, came Garth, fingering his knife. He did not seem interested in his heavy Dragoon .44, thonged low on his right hip.

"Hombre, how long do you want to live?" Creel said.

"Long enough to kill a man."

"Who?"

"You!" Street's bright, reckless smile flashed. "If you built Ed's hangnoose."

Creel licked his lips. "I'd play my cards wisely, if I were you," he said. "Sometimes a man can look for silver and get lead instead. Savvy?"

Street savvied. Elation made his heart leap. Silver! His bluff had worked; Creel had inadvertently given him the key to Ed's discovery. He knew the Washoe was a maze of goldfields. Silver mining was unheard of anywhere in the territory. He was no assayer—he could not be sure, but his guess was that silver and the blue gold were one, probably some blue-shaded quartz in Gold Canyon where his brother had conducted his experiments.

His speculation ended. Wrath ran hotly through him as he stared at the tall actor. He remembered the gay toast this man had raised at the window while his brother had swung by his neck. A madness such as Street had never before known, flamed in him.

"Lead shoots both ways," Street said. He glanced at the flame-faced man, saw his sweat and knew what it meant. "My gun is loose in the holster."

"Maybe it would be wiser to pull your freight."

AS CREEL spoke, he backed to the piano casually, lifted the flower vase and brushed his face across the red and yellow heads. "Think it over."

"I thought it over. A man thinks plenty when his brother gets himself murdered. He thinks it's no time for thinkin'. Watch that vase!"

The flowers twisted in the vase like arrows in a quiver as Creel swung his arm back and hurled it straight at Street's head at short range.

"Take him, Garth!" he shouted, as he raced for the darkness of the wing.

Street ducked instinctively, his gunhand dipping and lifting with steel. He was too late. The delicate glass crashed against his chest, spraying him with dripping flowers.

Glass fragments sliced lines of blood on his face. He shuddered, watching the flame-faced man's knife gleam past his elbow, and fired wildly. As he saw Garth's .44 leap up

and line for his head, he let his legs go. He hit the floorboards jarringly, on both knees, like a man praying. And a prayer was in him. Bullets moaned over his head, and his own gun was flaming, kicking against his palm.

Garth was standing with his back to the glistening black-and-white piano keyboard. Street's slugs punched into the livid scar of face and split it.

Garth lost his gun, staggered backwards until the piano stopped him. His huge hand sank onto the piano keys, making discord in the silence. Then the hand slipped off the keys and he crumpled up. He fell with a crash—massive and bleeding—dead on the stage.

Street leaped erect, swung his gun at the blond girl.

"Away from there, you, pronto!" he yelled.

She stood under the two shining buffalo lances, hung on the backdrop. She was on tiptoe, her right hand lifted high, her fingertips straining for the weapon just out of her reach.

She dropped back at his command and kicked her yellow satin skirt savagely. Her eyes glittered with hate.

Street searched the theatre for Creel but saw no sign of him—just bare stage, shadowy wings, the dense blackness of the pit and the hate of this woman's eyes.

"That man of yours can make love better than he can fight," Street said acridly, remembering the shadows in the window. He opened the side of his gun, reloaded it and holstered the weapon. "But he's not goin' to get away with murder. Not Ed's murder!"

A muscle twitched on the blonde's cheek. Then sleek composure came to her. She straightened her dress.

"Your brother wasn't murdered. He was executed."

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning that touching a woman the wrong way seems to run in your family," she said. "Your brother tried the same thing. The woman screamed. There was a mob." She shrugged. "They fixed him."

Street's lips straightened. He remembered the way she'd aimed her body at his eyes. He was beginning to know why. "Who was the woman?"

Her eyes mocked him. "Me," she said.

"Ah," Street sucked in a breath. "You!"

His hunch had been right. Ruth's frightened remark returned to his mind. It had been oddly phrased.

"I can't let them arrange another murder."

Yes, his brother had been murdered. This sleek creature had arranged it. The dark-haired girl had not been lying.

"You murdered him!" Street whispered. "You and Creel. You were his friends or so my fool brother thought. He trusted you. He let you stake him and became your partner. He discovered silver in Gold Canyon and you killed him so you could claim first rights for yourselves. But you didn't use a gun. You killed him with a scream. You pulled a sandy on him in the hotel and then let the women-mad mob string him up. And you were drinkin' those toasts to success!"

HER EYES held their mockery, but her mouth-line was cruel. She moved closer, her satin dress rippling like a yellow wave.

"That's no good," Street snarled, fighting his rage. "Not before—and not now. A man like me can forget you're a woman. Don't trouble me I'm tellin' you."

Her pitiless lips curved. Her mouth opened to scream.

The scream never got out. Street's heavy fist swung up, a row of knuckles lining up in front of her gleaming white teeth.

"Get a mob after my neck like you did my brother, eh?" His fist twisted. "Go ahead. Then watch me tear your face up."

The red lips closed so fast that her teeth clicked. She shuddered. She glared at the twisting row of knuckles.

"Now you're playing smart cards." Street moved back, drew his gun and leaped off the stage. He thought of his brother hanging like that and winced. He'd be unable to rest easy until Ed was cut down. "Keep playin' them, you. Tell Creel I'll be back."

The murky shadows of the aisle closed around him as he backed through the theatre door.

The slanting wall of rain was gone from the night when he moved from the Johntown Theatre into the road. Wind blew gently. The rain would soon come again. Above, the stars were blinded by a thick mist. There was no sky.

Heavily mackinawed miners shuffled by in the mist, their unseen boots clumping on board sidewalks. Their faces were blurred, shapeless white patches.

When Street saw the bare hotel balcony

where his brother's body had dangled, he squinted with surprise. The body was gone. There was nothing on the wooden barrier except a frayed piece of the rope which had killed him.

"Mr. Street!"

A girl's whisper came to him from somewhere in the mist. The whisper was urgent.

"Here. At the hotel lean-to. It's Ruth. Hurry!"

He moved carefully through the murk. A light hand caught his wrist and drew him against the lean-to boards beside her.

"Thank heaven you're alive," she breathed. "I heard the shooting. I prayed."

He studied her face, a white circle in the steamy haze. He remembered her eyes were a beautiful dark brown. She was trembling. He sensed the warmth of her glance and her interest. He believed she had prayed. There was no parallel to his acceptance of her friendship, no logic to it for a man as cynical as he. Although he was disturbed he could not deny his feelings. Because of this effect, he stared at her with an even sharper interest, and found himself thinking he wished he'd known her long before. Then he shifted his gaze, knowing she had begun to understand him.

"My brother—where is he?" he asked her awkwardly.

"They cut him down."

"They?" Street was surprised. "Who?"

"The sheriff and his deputies. I saw them when I left the theatre. He's—he's in proper hands."

Street sighed and said that was good to know. It was. The human marionette in the rain was too vivid in his mind. Then he answered her unspoken question.

"My bullets didn't miss."

Her hands lifted, the long fingers weaving together. "Creel? You killed him?"

"Not Creel. He's still alive. So's that blond devil. I got Creel's knife thrower—Garth."

Her long fingers untwined, reached through the mist, caught his shoulders—and clung.

"Ride out of the Washoe!" she pleaded. "Listen to me. Please! You haven't a chance against them. This is a wilderness of men without women. Men are beasts without women. You're new in Johntown. You don't know how easily a man can die here."

STREET nodded. "I do know," he said. "That blonde is a good little teacher. I'm not through with her. I'm staying." Then he scowled. His hands flashed up, trapping hers tightly.

"Why do you warn me?" he demanded. "You risk your life, warning me. You know that. What's in this for you? What do you stand to gain by befriending me? Answer me!"

"Must a person befriend another for gain?" she answered.

Street stared at her. His hands released hers, then returned and they were gentle.

"Who are you, Miss Ruth?" he asked.

"I'm Miss Belle's personal maid," she said. "Life was peaceful for me until your brother discovered silver above Devil's Gate in Gold Canyon."

"The blue gold?"

She nodded. "That's why they planned his murder. It's worth thirty-five hundred dollars to the ton. They aim to go over the Sierra in the spring and start a mining company in California. The Johntowners are throwing the silver away without dreaming of its value. The only 'color' they respect is gold. And the quartz Ed ground down in his mortar is blue. But it's a new Mother Lode!"

Street heard her say it was only right that Ed's discovery should belong to him now, and he became curiously impatient with her. Strange, but for a man whose life had taken him from card-table to card-table, wealth now was the furthest thing from his mind.

"That blond devil has a grip on you," he said. "Why?"

That brought fear upon her once more.

"I'm all alone here," she said. "Oh, it's—awful!"

"No folks living?"

"None. But I've always felt I could manage by myself. Until Miss Belle and Creel went on tour from Placerville to the Washoe. I'm frightened now. This awful womanless place! If she fired me, I'd go out on the street and be lost." She shivered. "I'm frightened."

"Don't be. You won't be a dancehall girl."

"Good girls become dancehall girls, too. Bad times make them bad."

A tremor pulsed through Street.

"And you risked that to befriend me," he muttered.

"What?"

"Nothing," he said. But it was something. It was a lot. In that moment, a profound change of values took place in his mind. "I wish Ed were alive," he said. "I'd like to

tell him something."

"Something special?"

"Yeah, something special. He frowned in the darkness. "I'd tell him he was right," he said, and he didn't explain although he knew she was puzzled. Instead, he unfastened his money belt and dropped it abruptly into her hands.

"Oh, no, I couldn't accept that!"

"Take it," he said harshly. He inclined his head at the Johntown Theatre, a murky bulk rising out of the mist. "Sometimes it's the other feller's gun that doesn't miss. If I don't come back, that'll pay your stage fare to Placerville from Gold Canyon on through to Dayton. You'll be safe there."

She didn't try to deter him any more. She saw him glance up again at the frayed rope on the hotel balcony. Her protests died.

There was an unreality to the whole thing —the silent threat of the murky building, the frayed rope almost invisible in the mist, and the youth who had died at the hands of a howling mob of miners. She sensed the force that drove Street. There was no running away for this man. He did not know how to run away.

"I'll be waiting here," she murmured. "I'll be praying."

"I'm sure you will." Seeing her shadowy form, something within Street flamed. He drew her close to him. The curve of her cheek was warm against his, and he heard her dark hair rustle faintly. He touched it with his hand. He never knew why he said it, but he did.

"Hello!"

The fervent welcome in her voice thrilled him.

"Come back!" she said. "Come back."

"I'll come back," he said. He turned and moved through the mist toward the theatre. "That's a promise."

CREEL was all alone on the stage when Street re-entered the theatre. The tall actor stood against the backdrop. He'd just removed the flame-faced man's body. The buffalo lances shone over his head. His hands curled into fists, watching Street move to him.

Street advanced down the shadowy aisle, and vaulted onto the stage. He glanced warily at the dark wings, searching for the revealing flash of a yellow satin skirt. There was only darkness. The blond woman was gone.

Moving incredibly fast, the tall actor stepped forward. He drew within five paces of Street and laughed.

"Belle told me you'd be back. She said you had a lot of ideas about life. My life." His fists quivered. "You talk too much. You know too much. Too bad."

"You cold blooded snake!" Street said. "You fight good with your mouth. Why the devil ain't you packin' a gun?"

"A brave man and a gunhawk aren't the same thing," Creel retorted. He held his fists out like a man taking handcuffs. The fists churned expectantly. "I'll kill you with these."

Street grinned recklessly. "Maybe you will and maybe you won't. He unbuckled his gunbelt. The heavy Colt thudded on the floorboards.

They circled each other warily, fists up and quivering, their long, flat shadows vividly defined in the stage light. The shadows moved together, inch by inch, Creel's the faster. Then the fast shadow shot forward and Creel's left arm hooked upward, rifling through Street's guard. Street took the jaw-smash with hunched shoulders, his lips split into a grin.

He bored deliberately at the tall, dancing actor, holding his fists high and still, throwing no punches. This man was lightning on feet. A different attack was needed in fighting this man.

Again and again, Creel's long shadow raced around Street, baffling him. Again and again the actor's long arms hooked and stabbed and shot punishment at Street's body and head. And Street kept boring in, taking the blows with hunched shoulders, feeling his blood stream warmly on his face, and grinning.

"Maybe you will and maybe you won't," he muttered. "Maybe you will and maybe you won't."

The long shadow on the stage lost a piece of its lightning, slowly.

Creel paled, although he hadn't taken a blow. There was something relentless, something terrifying and silently savage about this grinning, bloodied fighter who kept boring in deliberately, absorbing blow after blow, his fists never lashing out, just leveled up there like that, clenched and waiting . . .

Creel licked his lips. He moved against the backdrop. He shot a desperate glance at the left wing, and then at the discarded Colt, directly behind Street.

"Maybe you will and maybe you won't," Street muttered and he bored ahead, fists lifted slightly.

Creel cursed him. He flattened against the backdrop, one long arm going high and tearing loose a shining buffalo lance.

"That's the last time you say that, blast you!" he shouted. "Get his gun, Belle!"

Street got a flash of the blond woman racing out of the left wing. Then he saw her come directly behind him, her hand drawing his Colt loose. He flung himself down.

The thrown lance whirred and drew a fleeting shadow on his white, uplifted face. Blending with it was a scream, a woman's scream—a scream that cut through the theatre-darkness and the walls and hurled itself far into the misty night beyond.

Street watched the blond woman die on the lance and crumple. He had no time to feel pity. He leaped up, and plunged at the swaying, staring Creel who was dumbly reaching for the second buffalo lance.

Street might have seized his gun from the blonde's hand, but he used his fists instead. An idea had flashed through his mind, listening to the yells of the miners outside, coming on the run to investigate the scream.

"Like Ed swung," he muttered, and tore the lance from the tall actor's hand.

Creel staggered, legs kicking. Street folded him up with a fast left deep in the midsection. He dropped the lance and pounded blow after blow to the tall man's middle until his arms sagged under their weight and numbness.

Street stepped back. He wiped blood from his lips, watching Creel sink, semi-conscious, to the floor.

"Like Ed," Street listened briefly to the yells of the miner's, drawing near. He dragged Creel across the stage, next to the blond woman. Carefully, he curled the tall actor's hand around the shaft of the lance. He grinned, hearing Creel gasp and stir weakly. He scooped up his gun and ammunition belt.

STREET was in the shadows of the wing when the first miners pounded down the murky aisle to the stage.

"Like Ed," he muttered again, watching Creel flounder, then rise, white-faced. Street laughed—silently. He sidled quietly into the mob as the miners swarmed onto the stage. He twisted his way through the mass, and reached the door. The mob-roar throbbed in his ears.

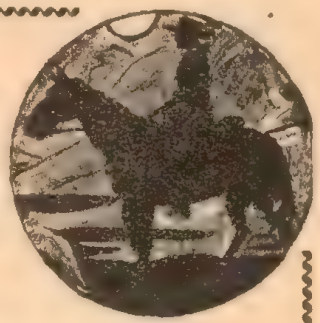
He stepped gratefully into the cool mist of the road.

"Big necktie party, pronto!" a hoarse-voiced miner shouted at him. "Right on the stage inside. Fellow named Creel killed a woman. A woman!" he repeated reverently, unable to believe it. "The coyote! Hear him yellin'? Sneaking snake's sayin' he don't want to die. Hah! And him caught red-handed. He's so close to brimstone he can smell the smoke! Hey, where you goin', stranger?"

Street peered through the mist at the hotel lean-to, shadowy in the distance. He couldn't see the dark-haired girl, but he knew she was there and he could imagine the warmth in her eyes. Then he thought of the mining company it was in his power to build and somehow, it seemed less important than ever.

"I'm goin' to see a friend," he said. And he moved to the shadowy lean-to, away from the swelling mob-roar.

How Well Do Yuh Know Yore West?



HOWDY, hombres and hombresses! Sharpen yore wits on these five questions about the West. Three right, or 60% is passing—and if yuh kin give the plumb proper replies tuh more than that, yuh're a top hand. Don't look at our answers on page 97 before trying this quiz your ownself. Okay? Let's go ahead—and best luck.

1. Who discovered Yellowstone Park?
2. In early pioneer days, was there a strong conflict between sheepmen and cattlemen?
3. Who was known by friendly Indians as "Pahaska"?
4. Is the American Bison a Buffalo?
5. What Western state produces about one-third of the gold, silver, copper and lead mined in the United States?

LIAR'S LUCK

By SYL MACDOWELL

The heat's on when a pair of rollicking range rannies get warm-hearted toward a poor little sheep, and it brings 'em a mighty cold reception from the chilling Rocky Spagnola!

CHAPTER I

The Lost Sheep

IT WAS a day in November, about mid-afternoon, though it seemed much later. Dusk spanned the desert sky, turning to a soft undertone the vivid redrock uplands of southern Utah. An uneasy wind out of the north told that a storm was brewing, though there were no clouds, no haze. Instead, the usually brilliant blue sky had turned sullen, solid gray—as some crystal-clear fluid in a laboratory tube would turn murky by the addition of an incompatible acid.

South through this silent, spaceless wilderness rode two men. Not aimlessly but with anxious urgency. For "Swap" Bootle and "Whopper" Whaley understood weather signs and they knew how swiftly winter could lash down on this redrock country.

SWAP

The sign was for snow—hard, freezing snow, sharp as glass particles. Hardship that would be for travelers, man or beast.

To be caught in this high, bitter country in a snowstorm was particularly aggravating to Swap and Whopper. For on beyond, not many miles, the land dropped away to a warm basin under the Grand Wash Cliffs, where they planned to spend a lazy, comfortable winter.

They were saddle tramps, this oddly-assorted pair. Ex-cowpunchers adrift in the great solitude. This life they preferred to working for wages, for in their minds they dwelt in a golden age when the West was young, before the tension and haste of highways and noisy, modern towns and pressing responsibilities had spread the blight of civilization even to the oldtime cattle outfits they had known.

So here they were. Swap, with a shiny round face both stupid and shrewd and short legs that hardly reached the stirrups on his peculiar bay-sorrel. Whopper with his long face, cud of plugcut in his sunken, grizzled cheeks and with an imagination that awed and fascinated his little pardner.

To put it baldly, Whopper was a colossal liar. He could lie faster than his cheese-colored roan could run and it was a pretty good horse. Outside of eating and sleeping, lying was Whopper's main enjoyment. The ability to lie glibly was sometimes useful to loafers such as they, who lived by their wits. But the trouble with Whopper was that he lied so expertly that he deceived himself. Even when he failed to convince others.

An example of his self-deceit came as they reached the head of a long wash and started down along its sandy bottom, where a thin

As Rocky Spagnola slapped at his pants, the attendant seized the extinguisher and chased after him, but he was only able to squirt it three or four times before Spagnola out-distanced him

rill of water fed a chain of stagnant pothole pools.

"In the old days," he told Swap, "beaver was plentiful along here. But I could trap a few now, if we had time to stop over."

SWAP gave him a doubting, sidelong glance.

"When did you ever do any beaver trapping?" he inquired.

"When? Why, I came with Jedediah Smith through this country!"

"Never heerd yuh mention it before."

"We promised each other to keep it a secret, on account of the beavers. Yuh're the first one I ever told."

"Accordin' to the history books," said Swap, "Jedediah was the first white man tuh explore this country. He wrote up his adventures."

"The heck he did! When?"

"Can't say, exackly. But he was kilt by Injuns more'n a hundred years ago."

Whopper showed no embarrassment in being tripped up in his idle prevarication.

"Huh! Reckon that's why I ain't met up with him lately," he said. "Anyhow, what got me to thinkin' about it was a nice warm beaver jacket I wish I had. Instead of this skimpy, flappy vest."

His skinny frame shuddered with a passing gust and he drew the worn, tattered garment closer around him.

They rode awhile longer in silence, hats pulled low and shoulders hunched. They had food and a few dollars, more than usual, so their sole concern was to reach some sort of haven before nightfall where they could spread their blanket rolls and rest their weariness.

Suddenly a sound ahead brought the two of them to sharp alertness. It was the blatting of a sheep.

The cheese-colored roan's flanks quivered to the rake of spurs.

"Sheep camp 'round the bend, it sounds like," gabbled Whopper. His imagination went to work immediately. "A lonesome sheepherder'll be glad to see us, grateful for our company. He'll set us by a hot campfire, cook up a mess of mutton, bake some biscuits and put us up for the night in his tent. Hospitable cusses, sheepherders are!"

They hastened around the bend. Disappointment faced them. Whopper's enthusiasm faded. No sheep camp. No friendly herder. Nothing ahead but the winding, deepening wash, the scummy pools fringed with yellow-frosted willows and grass, hemmed in by the bleak sage slopes. Nothing to greet them but one lone sheep, an old ewe that blatted again on sighting them and came toward them.

"Migosh, just a lost stray," grunted Swap. "Left out here from some passin' flock."

The old ewe would not have approached them so trustingly if it had noticed the hungry gleam in Whopper's eye.

"The coyotes'll git her," he hinted. "Mebbe we better put her out of her misery, huh?"

"If a sheepman ketched yuh gnawin' a mutton chop, he'd put you out of yore misery," Swap pointed out.

"If coyotes don't git her, she'll freeze. Been sheared right recent, I observe."

As he spoke, Whopper's hand toyed with the butt of his Colt. Swap leaned out and knocked his hand aside.

"Lookit here, Whopper," he remarked severely. "Mebbe you was a beaver trapper and early explorer, but there's one thing neither of us was, is or will be."

"What's that?"

"A sheep thief."

Whopper shrugged gloomily.

"All right, then," he huffed. "Let the pore critter suffer a lingerin' death. Yuh got a cruel streak in yuh, Swap."

"If yuh're feelin' so plum merciful, why don't yuh do sumthin' practical for that animal?" Swap argued.

"Such as?"

Swap didn't have his pardner's gift of imagination but he sometimes possessed an impish sense of humor.

"Take that vest yuh been complainin' about. Yuh won't need it when we git down on the lower desert. S'pose yuh sort of loan it to that old ewe? She won't freeze to death then. Also, the man-scent on it will protect her ag'in coyotes."

To Swap's surprise, Whopper accepted the suggestion with a thoughtful nod.

"Mebbe yuh got a good idea there, pardner," he said. "The herder, he'll be mighty pleased, too, when he finds the critter. And sees that I took the trouble to protect her."

"Yuh—yuh mean—?"

With hands numb and cold, Whopper fumblingly unbuttoned his old vest.

"I mean," he announced self-righteously, "that while you set there preachin' kindness to dumb animals, I aim to act. Shake out yore throw-rope, Swap. Help me catch that ewe."

CHAPTER II

Sheep Clips Man

ROPING a bewildered, docile sheep was easy for an expert cowboy used to capturing bigger, livelier animals. Swap made a good throw and the sheep struggled weakly in his noose. He dallied the lariat to his saddle horn, holding it taut as Whopper stepped out of leather and straddled the blatting ewe.

He got the vest on her, forelegs through the armholes and buttoned it snugly. Then he freed her and stepped back.

"Fits you good as it did me, old gal," he said. "Yuh're welcome to it."

Without lingering to express her thanks, the ewe darted up out of the wash and made tracks from that vicinity at frightened speed. Whopper swung a long leg over the roan and started again, the sharp wind biting through shirt and underwear to his skinny ribs. But he was warmed by knowledge of a kindly deed. Moreover, if they kept going, the wash would eventually bring them to the small settlement of Beaver Dam.

At Beaver Dam, on the highway route that nipped the upper left-hand corner of Arizona, was a small store where he could buy a jacket to replace the vest. Thus he would soon reward himself for his merciful impulse.

Doggedly they journeyed on through the chill half-light of the gathering storm. After awhile they came on rutty wheel tracks and quickened their pace. It was evening when they sighted the sweep of headlights along the highway on a long climb past Beaver Dam and a nest of twinkling lights which marked the tiny center of human habitation.

It was dark when they dismounted in front of Whopper's objective—the store.

Warmth and brightness cheered them as they entered. It was Swap who made the suggestion that his shivering pardner invest in some garment to replace the vest.

"We can afford it, bein' in the money like we are," he said. "By my count we've got a cash fund of twenty-three dollars and eighty-six cents."

His persuasion was needless. Whopper already had plucked a denim jumper from a shelf and tried it on. He shook himself into it and preened himself in front of a mirror.

"Ain't as elygant as a beaverskin coat or

WHOPPER

a sheepskin windbreaker, but plenty good enough for the warm climate down yonder."

"That'll be four dollars and seventy-five cents," said the storekeeper, who was eager to complete the sale and close for the night.

Whopper automatically slid a hand in a denim pocket. Then plunged both hands into the pockets of his cow-pants.

He turned a stricken glance on Swap.

"B-by any chance," he faltered, "have you got our money on you, pardner?"

"You always pack our bankroll," Swap reminded him uneasily. "You had it last—two tens, three dollar bills and some change. Remember?"

Whopper remembered with a dismal groan.

"Migosh!" he gusted in a husky whisper. "Somewhere up in the redrock country a stray sheep is chasin' around with our lifetime savings!"

Swap stared at Whopper as though he had never seen him before.

"Yuh—yuh mean we're busted?"

"Yup!" Whopper gulped miserably. "Every last cent we had is in a pocket of that old vest!"

The storekeeper's face went stony.

"This bizness is on a strictly cash basis," he snapped in a brittle voice.

"But—but migosh, mister!" wheezed Whopper. "If yuh'll only wait till we turn back and make a looksee for that danged sheep."

The storekeeper didn't understand. He didn't want to. He took out his doorkey and twirled it impatiently.

"If I listened to every hard-luck story that

come along," he declared harshly, "I'd soon be as busted as you rannigans are. Do you want that jumper or don't you?"

The pardners were in a daze as he herded them out of the store, banged the door shut and locked it. A dark gust whirled leaves from a big sycamore across the road. With it came taunting scent of steak and fried potatoes from a steamy-windowed eating place. Lights shone from a cozy row of model cabins. Whopper wrapped his arms around him and chafed the goosepimples that stippled his suffering hide.

HE LOOKED up and down the roadway with small, forlorn hope. Unless Providence showed some intention of tempering the wind to the shorn, both of them were due for a cheerless night.

"In a time like this, the best climate is in bed," croaked Swap. "Let's look for someplace to spread our soogans."

"N-no supper?" bleated Whopper.

"Too windy for a fire. We can open a can of beans. Which luckily you didn't have in a vest pocket."

"Cold beans!" moaned Whopper. "With nuthin' to slosh 'em down with!"

"This ain't no time to be finicky!"

"B-but we hain't fed ourselves since mornin'!"

"Better git used to skimping, now that we're busted."

As they huddled in front of the store in the throes of indecision and helplessness, a small, rattly-sided ranch truck came up from the south and hauled to a stop under the broad canopy of a lighted gas station.

Their attention was drawn to that glass-sided establishment as the driver swung down from behind the wheel, went inside, pulled off his gloves and warmed his outspread hands beside a heating stove.

"There's a idear!" chirped Swap. "We can at least skitter over there and git thawed out."

They stirred themselves stiffly, joining the scurrying sycamore leaves and swept into the gas station.

They joined the man hovering over the heater. He was a huge walloper, taking up so much space as he blotted up warmth that they could scarcely squeeze in reach of the heat. The man wore a greasy cap with dangling ear flaps, a mat of beard and heavy, rugged overcoat with ripped pocket corners.

The outstanding thing about him, as they ventured a look at his face, was bushy, projecting eyebrows of violent red.

He worked those lobster-claw eyebrows as he sized up the pair of them. The eyebrows overhung small, suspicious eyes that tallied them from head to foot.

"T-traveling far, mister?" chattered Whopper in an effort to be sociable.

An unintelligible grunt from behind the whiskers was the only answer.

Swap searched for words to fill in the conversational abyss.

"Good night to hole up somewheres," he said.

The big man, ignoring this overture, bawled out loudly to the service attendant.

"Squirt in ten gallons there, splayfoot, and git a wiggle on!"

The attendant leaped briskly to obey.

"Sure, sure, Mister Spagnola," he said. "How about the oil and water?"

"Full up," growled Spagnola.

"Sounds like you've got a hot motor. I hear something sputtering out there, like a boiling radiator."

"Them's painters," Spagnola muttered. "Got a crateload of painters. They're hungry."

The explanation seemed to satisfy the attendant. He fueled the truck. Spagnola got in and drove on upgrade until the truck's tail lights glimmered to specks.

Swap and Whopper, with the stove to themselves, practically embraced it. To prolong their welcome, Whopper got the conversation going again.

"Painters must be in big demand in Mister Spagnola's vicinity, wherever that is."

"Rocky Spagnola is about the biggest sheepman in these parts," the attendant told him."

"There's something I plum detest," Whopper said fervently.

"Sheepmen?"

"No, sheep."

"What's a sheepman need with a truckload of painters?" Swap inquired.

THE station attendant, a freckled country youth, looked puzzled. Then as enlightenment dawned, a grin spread across his face.

"Oh, painters! That's what old-timers like Rocky Spagnola calls 'em."

"Calls what?" asked Swap.

"Panthers—cougars—mountain lions."

Whopper was jolted into sudden interest.

"Migosh, pardner, mebbe there's a opportunity for us to pick up some easy money hereabouts with my valuable trappin' experience! If they're aimin' to git rid of mountain lions, then me and you can—"

"Hold on!" interrupted the attendant, "Rocky Spagnola don't crave to get shut of painters—panthers. He's fetchin' 'em in. By the truckload."

"That's a new one," Whopper exclaimed. "How come?"

The attendant straddled a stool.

"It's thisaway," he explained. "Past few years they've practically exterminated all the pain—panthers, I mean—in this region. They've hunted 'em and trapped 'em. Result was, deer and jackrabbits became so numerous that they browse the range clean and don't leave enough feed to support sheep. Now ranchers like Rocky Spagnola are getting hold of p-panthers wherever they can, haulin' 'em back in to thin off the deer and jackrabbits. Haulin' 'em in and turning 'em loose, as Mister Spagnola will loosen that crateful when he gets up to his sheep spread."

"The pain—the mountain lions, they'll prey on sheep also," pointed out Whopper.

"Not if they're close-herded," said the service station youth carelessly as he went outside to greet another customer. "Not any, except strays."

CHAPTER III

Nabbed in the Act

HERE was a situation that called for solemn thinking. What would happen to their stray $23.86 if a truckload of hungry mountain lions were turned loose on the range inhabited by that lone ewe was easy for Swap and Whopper to imagine.

Swap drew a hand across his weary brow.

"We got to high-tail back and find that vest-wearin' woolly, pronto," he sighed.

The attendant re-entered.

"Snowin' and blowin' up-country," he reported cheerily. "That car had mashed-pertater snow froze all over the windshield."

"Good!" exclaimed Swap briskly. "Snow'll make easy trackin'. C'mon, pardner."

Whopper inched himself closer to the stove.

"Did you ever chase around in a blizzard in yore shirt-sleeves?" he asked dolefully.

"It's now or never," Swap declared. "By mornin' them mountain lions'll be spittin' vest buttons like peach seeds."

Their listener was trying to get the drift of their odd talk. It was apparent that his two cowish visitors had some urgent need to ride forth into the night. And that one, the thin mophandle called Whopper, lacked heavy clothing.

Nothing uncommon in that; not in Beaver Dam, where men up from the mild, lower desert were often caught in a storm sweeping the Utah uplands.

"Listen, gents," he proposed generously. "There's my old Army overcoat behind the door, if it'll help you any."

The blue-nosed Whopper eyed it longingly.

"If it ain't puttin' yuh out any, bud, I'll borrow it."

"Shucks, no! I'm stuck here on the night trick till eight ack-emma. Go ahead and use it."

Whopper climbed into it. He warmed himself awhile longer, until animation seeped into him.

Then they crossed the roadway to their horses, mounted and rode.

Up the long wash they went, patiently retracing their recent steps. Glum silence wrapped them for a long time. Until the mounting wind bore to their ears the shrill cry of a coyote.

It was a shuddery sound, as always. It turned Whopper's train of thought to a new worry.

"S'posen them mountain lions is as hungry as I am," he suggested. "And s'posen they come ontuh us before they find that stray sheep. What then?"

"Then," Swap said grimly, "I don't reckon we'll need our twenty-three dollars and eighty-six cents."

The answer was more pointed than pleasant. Whopper's long, bony legs quivered until his boots rattled in stirrups.

"I can think of easier ways of gittin' hold of twenty-three dollars and eighty-six cents than huntin' that gol-dinged sheep!" he said hoarsely.

"Yuh don't mean goin' to work!" Swap exclaimed in a shocked tone.

"Migosh, no! Nuthin' so rash as that!"

"Then what?"

"Hunt mountain lions. Trap 'em alive and sell 'em to Mister Spagnola and other needful sheep ranchers."

Swap applied his dollar-wise shrewdness to that suggestion.

"How much yuh reckon they'd pay per head?"

"If we meet up with Mister Spagnola, we'll dicker with him."

Little did either of them suspect how soon that meeting was destined to be. Also, with a suddenness beyond their fondest hopes they came onto sheep tracks—the tracks of the now-valuable stray.

Night though it was, the tracks were visible on the thin layer of driven snow, for a shrouded moon cast an eerie, shadowless glow. It was as light, almost, as during the gloomy afternoon.

The tracks descended a bank to a pothole, braided around it where the animal had browsed, then took off again onto higher ground and from there went on, straight toward a low, long range of hills.

"That old ewe had more sense than us," said Swap.

"How so?"

"Fergot yore old range savvy? Sheep always hit for the hills in a storm, same as cattle. To find shelter from the wind."

"Yuh're right, pardner. I bet we'll find the critter right sudden, after all—with a little luck, which we shore deserve."

THEY tracked with new eagerness, hurrying before the spitting snow covered the small hoofprints. As Whopper had predicted, they led to a draw. Mesquite clumps threshed thorny branches in the wind until the embracing ridges shut off the blasts and they found themselves in a calm pocket, a small, circular basin of yucca and sacaton grass.

"There she is!" Whopper yelped gleefully. "Yonder by that cutbank!"

The roan swerved. Swap kneed the bay-sorrel around, unrigging his rope. The sheep, with memory fresh of its earlier encounter with these two riders, started off at a rocking run.

Swap's rope whirled and the bay-sorrel spurted after the sheep in the cutting-out style to which it had been trained. The rope slithered out. Once again Swap made a perfect throw. The hondo dropped over the ewe's long, lean neck and whanged tight and it whirled over on its back in a shower of fluffy snow. The vest was intact.

Heedless of all else, forgetful of their surroundings and everything except their need for the cash in that sheep's vest pocket, they teamed up with the precision that would have made them a handy pair on any range. Swap and Whopper knew their trade.

This swift expertness in itself was unfortunate. For as Whopper peeled down and scuttled to the roped ewe, a murmur of sound sounded on a mesa close above. The sound swelled to the roar of a truck crossing the roadless ground in low gear. Headlights loomed and swerved.

The pitiless glare encircled the scene and clung there. The truck had stopped with its cargo of mountain lions that Rocky Spagnola had planned to free hereabouts.

Whopper halted too, blinking almost guiltily into the blinding brightness.

Then the booming voice of the sheepman ripped out like pronged lightning.

"Don't move out of yore tracks, neither one of you blasted sheep thieves!" he roared. "I knowed you was crooks when I first laid eyes on you. Now I've nabbed you in the act!"

Whopper, almost in reach of the struggling ewe and the $23.86, edged away toward his horse.

"H-hold on, friend!" he yammered frenziedly. "We c-can explain everything! We—we—"

His appeal was chopped off by the sharp crack of a rifle. A bullet whizzed powdery snow almost at his feet.

"Freeze, you horse-faced hyena!" howled Rocky Spagnola. "Don't make me drill you."

Whopper froze—literally and figuratively. Swap sat like a sun-blinded billy owl as the raging, swearing sheepman jumped from the truck and stormed down into the draw.

He looked seventeen times bigger than he had at the gas station as he loomed in the pool of light that held them.

CHAPTER IV

Claw and Fang

THE plain truth, simply stated, would correct this dangerous situation. Or would it? Thinking with frenzied haste, Whopper saw that Rocky Spagnola was not an easy man to convince in his present furiously triumphant mood. In any mood, for that matter. Certainly it was too much to expect of his credulity that

he would believe that any wayfarer would strip off his pitifully light clothing in a snowstorm out of sympathy to a shorn sheep.

It wasn't Whopper's habit to depend on truth, anyhow. Not when a fancy lie would do just as well.

So he faced the big sheepman with a wobbly attempt at a smile.

"F-friend," he warbled. "Consider yoreself lucky to be present at the most important scientific experiment since—since Darwin."

Spagnola's mean, small eyes were almost as penetrating as a bullet. His scrub-brush whiskers bristled as he thrust out his jaw.

"Are you as loony as yuh look?" he jarred out. "Can't be!"

"Yessir, this is a moment in history," Whopper went on. "It'll make you as famous as us, almost, Mister Spagnola."

The sheepman turned his scowl in Swap's direction.

"Are yuh both bughouse?" he demanded.

Swap gulped, nodded, then shook his head violently.

"I thought so," rumbled Spagnola.

"I—I'll explain further," Whopper said, trying to feign confidence by bracing back his shoulders and swelling his chest. "We picked a dark night and a lonely spot so's to keep this world-shaking experiment a secret. Which we share with nobody but you, f-friend."

"That's awful generous of you," snorted Spagnola who had started to become interested, if not impressed.

"Has it ever occurred to you," Whopper orated, "what it'd mean to wool growers if they could cut out the big profit of middlemen?"

It was plain that nothing of the kind ever had occurred to Rocky Spagnola. He rested his rifle in the crook of an arm to warm his hands by blowing on them.

"My efforts along this line are now crowned with success, M-mister Spagnola," Whopper announced. "Take a look at that there ewe of yores. What d'yuh see?"

Spagnola looked. A cavernous opening appeared in his whiskers as his jaw sagged.

"What in the name of creation!" he boomed. "Am I loony too? Or do I see a button-bearin' sheep?"

"Not only buttons, but a complete garment, weaved an' fitted out o' wool," Whopper told him. "Before yore eyes is the first sheep to grow a finished product! Grown through the secret Whaley process. Think of the possibilities, M-mister Spagnola!"

Swap nearly toppled from his perch on the bay-sorrel. He had heard Whaley whoppers for years. They had ranged from weird to wonderful, wacky to well done, windy to witty and waggish.

This one was a wow!

Whopper beamed importantly. For now Spagnola's mouth gaped big enough for bats to fly in and out of. But in the next instant, an anxious cry came from Whopper:

"Hold on, f-friend! K-keep away from that sheep! Don't t-touch her!"

But the sheepman was quicker than Whopper's plea. He had pounced on the ewe and jerked off the vest. He squinted at the inner lining.

"Complete even to the label!" he marveled.

Then he shook the snow out of it. Something fluttered in the air and sifted to his feet. Something jingled. He stooped and picked up $23.86. He gave Whopper an almost pitying glance.

"Even grows cash money on a sheep's back, huh?" he leered. "Well, that's purty good." He dropped the find into his own pocket and fingered the rest of the vest pockets carefully before flinging it down.

He smirked. "It's plum too bad to nip yore unusual talents in the bud, Dan."

WHOPPER looked slightly less self-confident.

"Dan? M-my name ain't Dan."

"Yuh must of heard about that other wonder-worker—Daniel in the lions' den. Now mebbe yuh've got some idea what I aim to do with you and yore fat, juicy accomplice."

He paused with a wicked grin to let his gruesome intentions sink in. Then to make sure that he was understood, he added:

"A truckload of hungry painters is waitin'. Light, Butternose! March, the both of you!"

Swap slid to the ground as the rifle muzzle jabbed up at him.

"Goshlemighty, Mister, ain't yuh even curious how that sheep came to be wearin' a vest? Listen! Give me time tuh explain how—"

"And plum spoil a good yarn?" Spagnola interrupted. "Not much, Lardtub! I catched you rustling my sheep. That finishes it. And it finishes you. March, y'hear?"

He jabbed Swap in the ribs with his gun.

Side by side, the two pardners began their wobbly-legged ascent out of the draw and up on the mesa, to the truck and its vicious cargo, which they could now hear snarling and spitting.

"This is what comes o' bein' kind tuh dumb animals!" wailed Whopper.

"It's what comes of dumb lying," Swap blubbered.

"Them painters'll swaller yore story," chortled the monster at their heels. "They'll swaller it whole. You, too."

They were beside the truck. Whopper leaned on a fender. He made one last appeal.

"Ain't yuh got no mercy, f-friend?" he pleaded.

"Not a speck," Spagnola assured him positively. "Now stand there in the headlights, the two of you, whilst I open them crates and—"

The snarling and spitting increased to a screeching crescendo that drowned Spagnola's words. With the din came a ripping, rending, splintering sound. The truck vibrated as a lithe predator squirmed free and leaped to the cab top. It crouched there, flat-eared and sharp-fanged, giving a throaty growl as it crouched and gathered itself.

Rocky Spagnola whooshed alarm. He swung around, his rifle up-aimed. Swap saw his chance, his first, last and only chance to accomplish what the mountain lion might not have time to do. He delivered a hearty kick at the broad seat of Rocky Spagnola's pants. The sheepman was jarred against the truck front. The rifle banged, shattering the windshield. With a yowl the mountain lion made a side leap from the cab top and vanished.

As Spagnola cursed and levered another load into his gun, Swap darted past and around him, into the open cab door to the driver's seat and released the brake.

As the vehicle went into motion, Whopper snatched open the door on the opposite side, leaped in and banged it shut.

This produced a screech louder than all the mountain lines in Utah could make—for the door slammed on the fingers of the closely-pursuing Spagnola.

That was the last they saw of him, just then.

Swap let in the clutch and the truck lurched ahead.

Swap could steer a horse almost anywhere. But he wasn't so expert at the wheel of a mechanized conveyance. They jounced and jolted over the rough ground, tossing about like a pair of dice.

Crates bounced off the truck, broke on the rocks. They were aware of that and knew that Spagnola's range was rapidly being repopulated with predators.

What was happening to Spagnola? Neither Swap nor Whopper worried about that. They were wholly concerned in their own welfare as the truck looped toward the rim of the mesa.

The front wheels plunged over as each of them flung open a cab door. They hurtled out. The vehicle went into a rolling crash and the headlights blinked out. They picked themselves up, shaken and snow-dusted.

Whopper was first to reel to his feet.

"Go for the hosses!" he yipped.

SWAP limped dizzily erect.

"How about collectin' our twenty-three dollars and eighty-six cents?" he called out.

"A fine idear!" panted Whopper. "You go do it!"

He then jumped over the bank and down toward the little basin where they had left the bay-sorrel and cheese-colored roan, reindropped.

Money, Swap decided, wasn't the most important thing in the world. He lumbered in pursuit of his agile pardner. They reached the trampled ground where Spagnola had captured them. The ewe was gone. The horses were gone. Nothing left to mark the spot but the crumpled vest, now a white mound under the sifting snow.

"Lion scent must o' spooked our faithful steeds," Whopper remarked unnecessarily. "And we better spook along after 'em before their tracks are snowed under."

The getaway sign was plainer than the sheep tracks had been. For the roped ewe had been dragged along by Swap's bay-sorrel at rope's end.

Although this was undoubtedly hard on the creature, the circumstances proved a boon to the pardners. For they had not gone far before they heard stricken blatting. Whopper sprinted ahead like a grasshopper.

Swap couldn't keep up with him. He didn't try. Nor did he call out for his pardner to slacken his pace. Shrewdly he considered the possibility that the sheep-sound would attract the famished, rampant mountain lions. Just as well to dawdle a bit and let Nature take its course.

CHAPTER V

Burning Britches

NATURE was one factor in the lives of Swap and Whopper that generally could be depended upon to perform consistently. Fortune was fickle and mankind full of deceit, but good old Nature was a square-shooter. For men who lived so close to the eternal verities, this was a good thing to know.

Whopper was first to see this principle demonstrated. As he neared the noisy ewe, a slithering, tail-lashing fellow-stalker became visible just ahead of him. There it was —what he dreaded most, with the possible exception of Rocky Spagnola. A big old mountain lion was going after that sheep like a fish after bait.

The scared horses also knew of the menacing presence. That wouldn't make them any easier to catch. Whopper suddenly lost his desire to catch them. He lurched to a halt, his scalp prickly with growing panic. He turned. A weak howl rose from his throat.

Behind him another sinister form slinked! Lion ahead, lion behind and he was trapped between! Cheated of mutton, that second lion would be easily satisfied with muttonhead for an evening snack. Bold with hunger, the beast wouldn't be choosy. Through Whopper's mind flashed all the tales he had ever heard of these range killers attacking humans.

The safest place he could think of, at the moment, was a cozy corner beside the heating stove in the gas station at Beaver Dam. There was more to it than that, he tried to tell himself, for he was honor-bound to return the attendant's overcoat in good shape.

His long legs went to work. He streaked off with a sense of direction as infallible as that of a homing pigeon. He angled from the horse-sheep-lion tracks and toward the long wash. Let Swap collect up the horses.

What Whopper did not know was that his little pardner had arrived at the same conclusion at almost the same time. Whopper was built better than he for running down stampeded horses.

Back to the wash Swap rushed breathlessly.

He had barely sat down to get his wind when he heard running feet. Spagnola? Who else! Swap leaped up and got going again.

He ran until his short legs went rubbery. Skirting a waterhole, he tripped in the matted grass under its soft layer of new snow and fell headlong.

As he painfully gathered himself up and got erect, he heard those running feet again. Not far behind, coming straight for him.

Terror gave Swap new stamina. He tootled on like a shot-at cottontail rabbit. He did not stop again until exhaustion claimed him. His rest was brief. Again the padded footfalls of his relentless pursuer sounded. Again Swap gasped and fled.

The agonizing race lasted until the snow-caped rooftops of Beaver Dam hove into sight and the blurry lights of the gas station appeared, a welcoming beacon in the perilous night.

Just outside the glass-sided haven, he slogged to a sudden stop. Lucky it was, this style of architecture favored by wayside gas station. Through the wide panes he beheld a disturbing presence.

By the stove, shoulders hunched, face darkly brooding, stood—Rocky Spagnola!

Boots clop-clopped on the roadway. Swap turned around. Whopper appeared like an apparition.

Their surprise was mutual, though both were ashamed to show it.

"I f-figgered on me-meetin' yuh back here!" puffed Whopper.

"Uh-huh!" breathed Swap. "I knowed yuh'd be along about now!"

He pointed a warning finger at the hostile, bristly-faced sheepman.

"Mister Spagnola must of counted on the same thing," he blurted. "He's waitin' for us tuh show up, it appears like. And there's his gun propped in a corner."

They huddled out in the cold for awhile.

"We got to figger some way of lurin' him away from that stove," Whopper said finally.

"We shore do—or else we'll plum freeze!" Swap was chilling fast after his strenuous exertion.

THEY gave themselves to another interval of wordless contemplation. Spagnola didn't budge. He stood with back close to the stove, changing his posture only once to reach back and turn up the heat. Sparks whirled from the stovepipe. Spagnola stared out into the night again. Once, when the station attendant opened the door to emerge and sweep snow away from the pumps, they

heard his grating voice.

"If yuh sight them miscreants, holler out!"

"Sure, sure!" said the attendant.

Swap and Whopper ducked behind the thick trunk of the big sycamore until the youth went back inside. He paused at the door before closing it. The pardners heard his voice, lifted in alarm. "Smoke! You smell it too, Mister Spagnola?"

The sheepman's fierce, red eyebrows worked up and down as he sniffed.

"Yeah. Something's on fire, all right! Like wool aburning, smells like."

He drew away from the stove for a look.

The attendant shouted:

"Your pants, Mister Spagnola! The seat of your pants is givin' off smoke!"

He made a grab for a fire extinguisher on the wall. But before he got it down, Rocky Spagnola uttered a shattering bellow. He went straight up grabbing at the region under his coat tail. "Hold still, Mister Spagnola!" cried the youth.

That was asking the impossible. The sheepman with another ear-piercing cry plunged for the door. He knocked over the attendant and sent the fire extinguisher tumbling.

A streak of bluish smoke furnished Spagnola with a comet tail as he tore out to the highway.

He slapped at his pants and gave tongue at every jump. The attendant regained his feet and groped for the fire extinguisher. He ran out and squirted it twice. But after that getting in squirting distance of the frenzied sheepman was like trying to down a bat with a fly swatter.

It was the most spirited performance that Swap and Whopper had ever witnessed. It seemed impossible that any object of Spagnola's tonnage could move so fast, could swap directions so nimbly.

Sparks trailed with the bluish smoke now. The storm wind was fanning the smouldering cloth into a glow. Spagnola's agonized yowls, screeches and bawls were heart-rending. Though the pardners managed to keep their sympathy in sufficient control so as not to share his suffering. Though it did seem that Fate was unjust, letting them freeze while Spagnola broiled.

Not a deep-thinker, Spagnola was at last driven to a solution of his dilemma. He brought his hands to the front of him, snatching at his belt buckle. He gave a two-handed jerk. His pants took the course of least resistance. With one extra-high leap, he parted company with them. He wheeled and whooped back inside the gas station, clawed the lid off of a can of grease and ministered first aid to himself with a lavish hand.

But this final act in the spectacular performance held no interest for the pardners. Out there on the highway, just a few yards from their hiding place, Spagnola's pants smouldered. They spurted out in quick unison.

Registered on their memories with photographic distinctness was that moment when Spagnola had thrust their $23.86 into his own pocket.

This knowledge enabled them to delve without delay into the correct pocket. Out came two crumpled tens, three ones and coins hot enough to comfort their cold hands.

They made fast work of it and as they finished looked about them preparatory to their next move. That uncertainty was settled by a gentle snort over past the sycamore.

There stood their horses. Loppy-eared, heads down, wearing that foolish look that is a horse apology for darn-fool doings. The bay-sorrel trailed rope. There wasn't anything on the other end of it.

The pardners rocketed for them. They hit leather without touching stirrup. They were on the go the instant they hit, down the highway and past the gas station, where Mister Spagnola was squatting and sizzling in a bucket of soothing lubricant. Lean, limber Whopper squirmed free of the borrowed Army overcoat. They were out of sight as it parachuted to earth.

"For once things busted in our favor!" Whopper gibbered happily.

"Liar's luck," Swap yapped into the wind. "Anyhow, it pays us to burn britches behind us sometimes!"

Then they settled down to bee-lining for the sunny, snowless desert.

●

Coming Soon: LAND OF MILK AND MONEY, Another Uproarious Complete Swap and Whopper Novelet by SYL MacDOWELL

A gun flashed in the winter sunlight—"Stop that team!" Parstone rumbled

WEATHER PROFIT

By CLIFF WALTERS

Mother Nature serves up a mite of Montana weather to help Ren Orchard in handling a plumb ornery Frontier neighbor!

HIS homely, honest face numb from the assault of winter wind, gangling, middle-aged Ren Orchard shoved open the door of the two-roomed cabin on Stirrup Creek and stepped inside. For a moment he stood there looking at a man who lay snoring in bed. A bulky, dark-haired man of about thirty-five.

Ren hesitated, then said, "Hello, Kirk."

The snoring stopped. A pair of dark eyes opened.

"Hello, Ren," Kirk Parstone said to his visitor. "I'd ask yuh to move over by the stove if there was any fire in it. But there ain't. Which is why I'm in bed—that and because my back's all crippled up. Hoss fell on the ice with me when I was comin' home from Trackville night 'fore last."

"Yeah, I know," Ren said. "Old Smoky Smith, the trapper, come by my place and told me about yuh. That's why I've fetched yuh over a load of cedar wood—chopped up."

"You are a neighbor," Kirk said gratefully.

He groaned, braced his elbows and pulled himself up to a sitting position. He looked dismally out the window, out at the snow on the hills to the north of Stirrup Valley.

"This infernal weather," he complained. "Ten below zero here in February. And my bunch of sheep out there on Carcass Slope. There'll be more carcasses if I don't get out there. And with some feed. My herder's probably out of grub and firewood." His voice was bitter.

"I thought of that," Ren said. "I hauled some wood and grub out to him yesterday afternoon."

"Good for you!" came the reply. "I'll make it right with yuh, Ren. Pay yuh for yore grub and yore work."

"Don't worry about that," said the lanky man with the mild gray eyes and shaggy brown hair. "Worry about yore sheep. The snow's too deep and crusted for 'em to get down to the salt sage. They've got to have feed."

"And they will," Kirk said. "I ordered a carload of corn. It ought to be on the sidin' at Trackville right now." He looked pleadingly at Ren. "Could I hire yuh to unload that car? Haul some of it out to my sheep? I hate to ask a man to tackle this kind of weather, but I'm so crippled up I can hardly move."

"I used to help yore Uncle Fred, who ran this place up till he died a year ago," Ren answered. "I don't know why I shouldn't help yuh, Kirk. We're neighbors, same as me and old Fred used to be."

Parstone's eyes brightened hopefully.

"And before he died," he said, his voice almost husky, "Uncle Fred told me you was the best neighbor a man ever had. I know now what he meant."

REN ORCHARD seemed a little embarrassed by this compliment.

"Yuh'd do as much for me, Kirk," he said. "Well, I'll unload that wood, cook yuh up a meal, and then head for Trackville. If yuh'll give me a check for the feed."

"Oh, gosh, that's somethin' else again!" Kirk Parstone moaned. "That corn'll come to about a thousand dollars. And I'm shore I haven't got that much money at the bank. I'll have to borrow a few hundred dollars to tide me over. I don't know just how much. Dang it all, Ren, I hate to ask still another favor. But if yuh'd pay for that corn—if we could handle it that way just till I'm able to get to town, I'd fix it then."

"I guess we could," Orchard said, grinning. "But I'm glad yuh didn't order two cars. I can't pay for more'n one, and still have a hundred dollars left in the bank. . . ."

Noon found Ren Orchard back at his own little place at Ledge Springs, a little thumb-like swale of meadowland at the edge of Stirrup Valley. From a stack of wild hay, precious now, the gangling man fed his dozen head of cattle. Then he drove on down to Trackville, ten long, bitter-cold miles away, where he paid for and unloaded—into a poorly constructed old building along the tracks—a carload of sacked corn.

The last twenty sacks Orchard loaded on his wagon. It was after dark when he pulled up to the livery stable and unhitched his team. He would stay in town tonight. Leave at daylight in the morning. Tired after his heavy work, he ate a frugal supper and went to bed in the none too warm little hotel. He begrudged the hours he must stay in town. Kirk Parstone's sheep needed feed as soon as they could get it.

It was still dark when Ren, swathed in his tattered sheeplined coat, stepped out of the hotel the next morning. Then he stopped in his tracks, surprised. There was no glacial sting in the air this morning. The wind, little more than a breeze, was mild. It was a chinook that was swiftly melting the snow, as it had been for several hours. Orchard grinned and mumbled, "This is Montana for yuh!"

He didn't wait to eat breakfast. He wanted to get as far as he could with his load of feed before the roads got muddy.

The mild breath of the chinook kept up during Ren's trip home. Patches of earth began to show through the melting snow on the hillsides. Those darker patches grew larger and larger. The big black team sloshed along, their tails and fetlocks spattered with mud. The load was pulling hard by the time Ren Orchard reached Ledge Springs and home.

The team was glad to stop, and Ren knew there was no use now of going on to the sheep camp at Carcass Slope. That band of sheep out there would no longer be huddled in the deep snow, begging with stolid eyes for food to fill their bellies. They would be scattering out to graze.

Orchard saddled his old buckskin horse and rode over to Kirk Parstone's cabin. The

husky neighbor, apparently much better today, was sitting at the table eating dinner. Again he looked up at Ren Orchard entering his dwelling.

"Howdy, neighbor," he said. "Did yuh fetch that bottle of whisky? That pain-killer for my back?"

"Nope," Ren answered. "After unloadin' a car of corn, I was too tired to traipse down to the saloon last night. And I left town early this mornin'. Uh—I brought a load of corn as far as my place. But I guess there's no use now in takin' it on out to the sheep."

"Of course not," Parstone said. "Yuh ain't blind, are yuh, Ren? Winter's over. Spring's come to Montana. We'll have to try sellin' that car of corn, if anybody'll buy it now, so's yuh won't have yore money tied up in it." He frowned. "I wish yuh'd fetched that pain-killer."

Ren Orchard was irked by Parstone's words, as well as his manner.

"I don't s'pose that corn'll sell so easy, if this weather keeps up," he said. But you can try sellin' it. It's yores, yuh know. And it's got to be moved out of that old Johnson buildin' where I stored it. That place ain't much good."

"Where'll I put it?" Parstone wanted to know.

"Ain't that yore worry?" Orchard retorted. "I've done about all I could to help yuh out, ain't I? Yuh don't seem so crippled up, either, Kirk, but what yuh could go to town in a buckboard, if I hitched up yore team for yuh. Mebbe yuh'd better go, get to the bank."

Parstone frowned.

"What's the matter, Ren? Yuh scared about that thousand dollars yuh've got tied up in that corn?"

"I don't like the way yuh're actin'," Ren Orchard replied, gray eyes steady.

"Then why don't yuh leave?" came the sharp reply. Getting up quickly, the husky man grabbed the coffee pot off the stove and filled his tin cup.

"Lame back!" Orchard growled. "It must've healed fast, the way yuh move, Parstone. Mebbe the pain-killer did it." He pointed to three empty pint bottles under Parstone's bed. "Layin' in bed half-drunk and lettin' a neighbor tend to yore camp, buy yore carload of corn and unload it. And because yuh knew I'd be fool enough to do it."

"Yuh was, wasn't yuh?" Parstone retorted. He didn't sit down again. He walked around the table slowly, a bit menacingly. "As long as yuh're gettin' on yore high hoss, Orchard," he said, "you can get rid of that corn yuh paid for! Or feed it to yore great big herd of cattle—a dozen head! Good-by."

"Not quite yet," Orchard said. "Yuh're comin' to town with me, Parstone. Yuh're gettin' a thousand dollars and forkin' it over to me." The gray eyes, usually tranquil, were blazing now.

"Get out, you long-eared fool!" Parstone moved forward, started to shove Ren Orchard toward the door.

Parstone didn't get far with his shoving. This lank, rawhide-tough neighbor who had juggled heavy sacks of corn yesterday was pumping a quick, savage blow at Parstone's angry face. A blow that crashed to the heavier man's anger-curled lips and sent him rocking back on his boot heels.

Surprised by the stunning swiftness of that blow, Parstone swore. Then, like a stung grizzly, he rushed and swung a vicious right at Ren's lean, grimly set face. That face moved just in time. And Parstone's big fist, missing its intended target, smashed against the door behind Ren Orchard. And Parstone went crazy mad.

He tried a left uppercut, one that barely grazed Ren's jaw. Orchard smashed another right to the face, took one that hurt and angered him. He caught Parstone with a jolt to the left ear, sank a hard left to the heavier man's stomach. Driven away, Parstone tried to kick Ren. But, quick as a battling bobcat, Orchard grabbed that big, upraised boot and jerked it up into the air, sending Parstone crashing backward against the table which upset amid the clatter of tin dishes.

PARSTONE bounded up—just in time to meet a haymaker on the nose. He reeled again. A mighty smash caught him on the chin. He went down, and didn't get up this time. Ren Orchard glared at the fallen man. Then he turned and went to his waiting horse.

Back at Ledge Springs, Orchard found another saddle horse, an old roan, tied in his barn. Later he found old "Smoky" Smith, a wizened little trapper with long gray hair, eating dinner in the cabin. "Glad I cooked enough dinner for two, Ren," Smoky said.

"So am I," came the reply. "I wasn't invited to eat over at coyote Parstone's badland barroom."

"Somethin' wrong, Ren?" asked the shift-

less old trapper. "Yeah, there is. I can see that by lookin' at yore face."

Ren Orchard explained what had happened. Smoky Smith listened, blinking thoughtfully.

"Well, I'll be clawed by a bobcat!" he said. "I never thought that Kirk . . . Huh! He shore ain't much like his old Uncle Fred used to be. Old Fred was as square as a die." Smoky scratched his head. "What the devil can yuh do with that corn?"

"I'm stuck with it," Orchard answered bitterly, stooping over the wash basin to lave his skinned knuckles. He straightened up, nodded at the new cabin he had been trying to complete. Only last week, he had got the roof on it. "I can store that corn out there, I guess, while I stay on in this old shack!"

"The winter ain't over," Smoky said. "Mebbe yuh can sell that corn yet."

"And mebbe not," Orchard answered disgustedly. "I need that thousand. I had my heart set on buyin' some more cattle this spring, enough that I could have a decent livin'. But now that's out." He shrugged.

"Know what I heard this mornin'?" Smoky said. "It wasn't a hoss fallin' on the ice with Parstone that put that crik in his back. He was in a poker game down at Trackville. He got in a fight. And got knocked down acrost a chair, when he was too full to do much battlin'. Huh! But I guess he wasn't today, eh? Dang, Ren. I knowed yuh was tough as rawhide steak, but I never thought yuh'd have the nerve to tackle big Kirk Parstone."

"He didn't give me no choice," Orchard answered. "I'm glad he didn't. I got a little somethin' for my thousand dollars. . . ."

Ren Orchard began hauling corn and storing it in the new, unfinished cabin, after he had tried in vain to sell the unwanted grain.

Making a round trip to town every day, Ren was hauling the last load home the day he met Kirk Parstone riding toward town. The sheepman, fortunate enough that he hadn't had to work for what he possessed, hitched around a new six-shooter that he had taken to wearing since his battle with Ren.

Parstone stopped his horse and called:

"Just a minute, Orchard! I want a word with yuh. I might make yuh an offer on yore dinky little place, just to get rid of yuh!"

Orchard didn't stop his team. Appearing to take no more notice of Parstone than he would of a rock alongside the road, he kept driving. The rider wheeled his horse, caught up with the passing wagon. A gun flashed in the winter sunlight.

"Stop that team!" Parstone rumbled.

Ren stopped.

"Yuh're goin' to listen to me, Orchard," Parstone growled. "I'm offerin' yuh a proposition, and I want yuh to hear it!"

"Yuh want me to be scared of that shiny new gun of yores," Ren answered coldly, calmly. "Well, what yuh goin' to do? Pull the trigger of that thing to make shore I never get my hands in yore coyote fur again, or are yuh just goin' to set there runnin' off at the mouth?"

The younger man's face twitched. "Don't start nothin'."

"Yuh act nervous, Mr. Parstone," Ren cut in, with biting contempt. "I'm not shore yuh could hit the broad side of this wagon if yuh did shoot. But I know this. I've got a six-shooter at home. And from now on yuh'd better never pull a gun on me."

He clucked at his team, went his way—and wondered what Parstone would do.

Parstone did nothing except sit there gaping for a long moment. Then he rode on.

Reaching home, Ren Orchard found the only visitor who ever called—Smoky Smith, trapper. Smoky had heard that Kirk Parstone was branching out, had borrowed money on his little ranch and sheep in order to buy another band of woollies.

"I even heard he'd like to have yore little place here," Smoky went on.

"So he told me—over the sight of his brand new forty-five," Ren said grimly. "I was here first, Smoky. Mebbe I'll be here after Parstone's gone—unless he stops scatterin' pint bottles between here and Trackville."

It was the first of March, a mild day, when Ren Orchard, in need of grub, hauled a load of cedar wood townward, in the hope of selling it for five dollars. Before he got to town, the breeze became stiffer, and whipped around toward the north. He looked at the darkening sky, put on his old sheepskin coat and urged his team along a little faster.

Before the black team reached town, a gusting wind began spilling sharp, stinging particles of snow. The old black team, of their own accord, shook their bridles and broke into a jog-trot. They knew what was coming. And so did their driver who wished he had never chosen this day to leave home. He would have to peddle his wood as quickly as possible, get his grub and get home to his few head of stock.

But Ren Orchard didn't leave town that evening, an evening when the blizzard, blow-

ing its chill white breath upon Trackville, plastered tall ribbons of white snow on the north side of cottonwood trunks and buildings, hour after hour.

Worried, hugging the stove in the little lobby of the hotel, Orchard was about to go upstairs to bed when Smoky Smith came in the wind-assaulted door. "Howdy, Ren!" he said. "I'm shore glad to see yuh."

"Why?" Ren asked. "Broke after playin' poker?"

"Flat broke this time," Smoky answered. "Them poker-pickin' buzzards down at the saloon set a trap for the trapper today. They let me win at first, then took everything I had. Six coyote hides, my roan hoss and saddle—everything."

"Was Parstone one of 'em?" Ren asked.

"Nope. He ain't in town, for a change," said the trapper. "Can I bunk with you, Ren? And can I go home with yuh when yuh go? I've got to get back to my traps. If I could borrow yore buckskin hoss for a few days, till I could get an old plug of my own, it would help a heap."

"When yuh goin' to stop tryin' to play poker, Smoky?"

[*Turn page*]

"When I die." The old man grinned. "I ain't goin' to make yuh a promise, then break it, Ren. When I hear the rattle of chips, I start sniffin' around like a danged coyote scentin' a carcass. Then, purty soon, the trap springs. And I go back to the range—broke. It's always been that way. It always will be. I skin the coyotes. Then the other coyotes skin me."

"Yuh're honest about it, anyway," said Orchard. "And yuh're a better neighbor than some, Smoky. Shore yuh can go home with me—if I can get home. And I've got to!"

By morning the wind had diminished, but the weather was well below zero and the snow was still falling. Piling up pretty fast now. Sometimes the black team bucked snowdrifts up to their bellies. But by mid-afternoon the black team was within three hundred yards of their barn—feed and shelter—when their driver, peering through the storm ahead, suddenly halted them.

"Now what?" mumbled old Smoky Smith.

"Hold the team, Smoky!" said Orchard, and got out of the wagon.

He walked ahead through the thickly-falling snow. Soon he could see another team standing at the side of his new cabin, a team hitched to a sled on which a husky man, working fast, was loading sacks of corn.

Ren unbuttoned his old sheepskin coat and took off his mittens. He wasn't far from the sled when Kirk Parstone, carrying a sack of corn, heard a grim voice calling: "Some folks might call that stealin', Parstone!"

The big man went rigid. A sack of corn tumbled down into the snow. And Parstone's new six-shooter, yanked by a quick, nervous hand, scraped up from its holster.

But an older six-shooter had come up from Ren's holster. Two shots jarred into the storm. A bullet whizzed two feet over Ren's head. But a slug from his own gun had sped truer, had gone smashing through Parstone's upper right gun arm while the victim of that swift marksmanship, emitting a hoarse cry, had spun back against the wall of a cabin now used for grain storage. Gun ready, Ren Orchard moved forward slowly.

"I told yuh, Parstone," he said, his voice brittle, "not to try pullin' another gun on me unless yuh aimed to use it."

"Yuh've shot me!" Parstone choked. "My sheep out there in the hills, half-buried with snow. Starvin'! I wasn't stealin' yore corn. I'd have paid yuh!"

"Yuh went for yore gun. Was yuh aimin' to pay me off in hot lead?"

A wagon came clattering up.

"What's all the shootin'?" Smoky Smith yelled. He stared, then blurted, "Well, look who's tryin' to steal a load of corn!"

As soon as the Trackville bank opened the following morning, Ren Orchard ambled in and cashed a three-thousand-dollar check.

"Surely Parstone isn't paying you that price for your little place out there, Orchard?" the banker said, as he counted out the money.

"Nope. Sold him some corn he had to have." Ren Orchard pocketed the money.

"Where is Parstone?" asked the banker. "I want to see him. And have an accounting with him. If he's going to buy three thousand dollars worth of corn, with money I loaned him to buy more sheep with, I want to know about it."

"Three thousand," Ren Orchard said. "Weather profit."

"Who's a weather prophet?" demanded the banker.

REN didn't answer that. He went outdoors, went on home. And got there as Smoky Smith, driving Parstone's team and sled, circled up to the new cabin to get another load of corn which would save the lives of snowbound sheep.

"Did yuh fetch back that hundred dollars Parstone's payin' me for haulin' his corn?" Smoky yelled.

"Yep," Ren Orchard answered. "And Mr. Parstone's restin' easy at the doc's house in town."

"Me! A whole hundred dollars at one crack!" said Smoky, a little awed by the turn of events. "And you with three thousand! A fortune, Ren!"

"Yep—weather profit," Ren Orchard said. "Profit I'd never had if Kirk Parstone had been a man and a neighbor, instead of what he is."

"He was a panic-struck coyote that couldn't see nothin' but jail bars, the bars he deserved, ahead of him," Smoky Smith replied. "But knowin' you like I do, Ren, I know yuh'd have hauled that corn out to them sheep yoreself, and if yuh'd never got a nickel for it, to keep them dumb brutes from starvin' to death."

"But Parstone didn't realize that at the time," was Ren's quiet answer. "I'm glad he didn't. And I'm glad I shot straight enough not to kill him."

Frost fired as he caught sight of a man ducking and weaving

A Hard Man to Convince

By SAM BRANT

Accused of double murder, young waddy Johnny Frost faces the grim gun fury—and proves he's a glutton for punishment!

JOHNNY FROST, from the Cross In A Box outfit, edged his sorrel up to the hitch-rail at the south side of the general store in Beaverville and just sat his saddle like a man generally does when he's going no place in particular and in no hurry to get there. The little cowtown was quiet.

"I shore admire to see men work," young Frost remarked, watching two men who were unloading boxes from a freight wagon standing in front of the store. "Specially when I'm loafin'."

Big Tom Bradford, the driver of the wagon, turned from the box he was about to lift out and looked at the husky young waddy on the horse. Bradford frowned, and glanced

at his helper.

"First time I ever seen anythin' like it," he said. "A jackrabbit settin' up ridin' a hoss."

"Yore sight ain't so good, Tom," remarked Bill Ward, the helper, as he stared at Johnny Frost. "That's ain't a jackrabbit—that's a nocturnal burrowin' carnivore."

"A what?" Frost blinked and looked hard at the lean, gangling man in the soiled shirt and levis. "What's a burrowin' carnivore?"

"Well, since yuh really want to know, I'll tell yuh." Ward grinned. "Most folks call it a skunk."

Johnny Frost glowered at him. Fun was fun, but he didn't like the tone of Bill Ward's voice. The way that freight wagon man had called him a skunk made it seem like an insult.

"That ain't nice, Ward," Frost said, as he dropped his reins and swung out of the saddle. He tied the reins to the hitching rail. "I shore ain't related to any of yore kinfolks."

It was a right warm morning, and Bradford and Ward had been working in the hot sun for over an hour. They were tired and short-tempered.

"Why, yuh big blabber mouth," Ward roared, stepping angrily toward Frost. "You can't call my kinfolks skunks!"

Might not have been any trouble, even then, if Johnny Frost hadn't tripped on a loose board as he stepped up onto the plank walk. He fell forward, and to save himself he reached out and grabbed Bill Ward by the shirt front.

"Take yore hands off me!" Ward snapped.

He lashed out with a hard right that landed right in young Frost's face. The waddy wasn't taking that from any man. He hit Ward hard and knocked him against the wall of the store.

"Quit it," growled Tom Bradford. "What's eatin' you two, anyway? I thought yuh both were just funnin'."

Neither Frost nor Ward paid him any mind. They moved close and smashed hard blows to the face and body. It was any man's fight, for they were both about the same build and right tough. Frost hit Ward on the jaw, and received a body blow in return.

OLD JEFF ADAMS, who owned the general store, came hurrying out. He looked like Santa Claus without the red suit, and he was carrying an ax handle in one hand.

"Stop this goldinged fightin', or I'll break both yore heads!" Adams roared, raising the ax handle. "Stop it, I tell yuh, or I'll knock yuh both cold."

Frost had realized there wasn't much sense to the fight anyway, so he stopped and lowered his arms. Ward figured that was his chance—and landed a blow to the waddy's chin that knocked Frost out. He hit the back of his head as he fell to the walk—it was some time after that when Frost opened his eyes.

He was lying on the ground in the alley around at the side of the store. It was cool there in the shade, and the way his head ached Johnny Frost didn't feel much like getting up.

"So yuh finally came out of it," a voice beside him said.

Frost turned his head. A lean, wiry-looking stranger in range clothes was hunkered down beside him, smoking a quirly.

"I seen the whole thing," observed this stranger. "That feller Ward hit yuh and knocked yuh back, then Bradford grabbed the ax handle out of the old storekeeper's hand and hit yuh in the back of the head with it."

"Bradford hit me and knocked me out?" Frost sat up. "I don't remember that happenin'." He looked the stranger over. "Who are you?"

"Matt Marsh is my name. Just rode into town a little bit ago. Never been in Beaverville before." The man blew out a cloud of smoke. "Looks like them two with the freight wagon shore don't like you none."

"If yuh just got into town, how do yuh know their names?" Frost asked. He couldn't decide whether he liked this Matt Marsh or not. Struck him there was something shifty about the stranger's dark eyes. "They tell yuh?"

"Heard the storekeeper talkin'," said Marsh. "He mentioned the names of them jaspers. I know that yuh're Johnny Frost, too."

Marsh got to his feet. He tossed the cigarette away, and didn't bother to make sure it wasn't still burning, even though it landed in some old rags at the side of the building. Johnny Frost decided then that he didn't cotton to a man who was careless about things like that.

"Now that I know yuh're all right, I'll

be leavin'," Marsh said. "But if I was you I'd watch out for Ward and Bradford." He repeated: "Strikes me them two have it in for yuh."

"Thanks," Frost said dryly.

He got stiffly to his feet and watched as the stranger turned and walked out of the alley. It seemed to young Frost that Marsh was doing a lot of worrying about an hombre he had never seen before in his life. It just didn't seem natural.

The quirly that Marsh had tossed away was still burning and the rags began to smolder. Johnny Frost stepped over and stamped out the sparks with his boot. Jeff Adams stepped into the alley just in time to see what Frost was doing.

"Good thing yuh put that out," growled the storekeeper. "I've got six barrels of dynamite and a box of dynamite caps in the shed back of the store. If a fire started anything might happen. Yuh all right now, Johnny?"

"Reckon so." Frost nodded. "Shore was a good fight while it lasted." He looked questioningly at the storekeeper. "What happened when I was knocked out, Jeff?"

"Nothing special." Adams shrugged. "Bill Ward hit yuh on the chin and knocked yuh down. When yuh fell yuh hit yore head on the walk and that sort of finished things for yuh."

"So that's the way it was then," Frost said thoughtfully.

He got to wondering why the stranger had lied about Bradford having grabbed the ax handle and bashing his head with it. It looked as if Marsh was trying to keep trouble stirred up between Frost and the freight wagon men. If so, Johnny Frost wanted to know why.

His head still ached and he didn't feel too good.

"Yuh mind if I rest a while in the back of the store before I ride back to the ranch, Jeff?" he asked the storekeeper. "The boss sent me in to get him some tobacco and stuff, but he said he wasn't in any hurry about my gettin' back."

"Shore, go ahead, Johnny," Adams said cordially. "Take a good rest on my bunk back there till yuh're feelin' better."

The two walked back along the alley and entered the store by the rear door. Frost saw the barrels in the shed with the red signs on them that read, "Danger—Explosive" and then in bigger letters "Dynamite" painted across the barrels.

"Shore would raise hob if them barrels blew up," he commented, and Jeff Adams just nodded.

THE storekeeper was a bachelor with sleeping quarters in the rear of his store. Frost went in, hung his gun-belt on the back of a chair, and stretched out on Adams' bunk. The old man went on into the front part of the store.

It was quiet and peaceful back there and soon Johnny Frost drifted off to sleep. He slept soundly for some time. When he awoke it was edging on toward night and the shadows were lengthening.

He heard voices coming from the front of the store. He glanced at his gun-belt. It was still there. It did seem to him that the belt had been on the other side of the back of the chair when he had fallen asleep, but he wasn't sure. The way he figured, it didn't matter much.

The voices grew louder. Men were coming through the store toward the rear and talking as they came. A door opened and Adams stepped into the room with big Sheriff Cooper right behind him.

"Thought it was kind of strange that a young feller like you would need to take a nap in the middle of the day," Adams said in a strange tone, as he stood there staring at Frost. "Didn't know yuh was doin' it as an alibi for a killin'."

"What do yuh mean?" Frost asked blankly.

"Bradford and Ward." The sheriff shrugged. "They was found dead in their freight wagon about a mile south of town. You quarreled with 'em, Frost. Yuh could have sneaked out of here the back way, got yore hoss without bein' noticed, rode out of town, shot and killed those two men, robbed 'em, and then come back here and made out like yuh been sleepin' all afternoon."

"What makes yuh so shore I done it?" demanded Frost, but he was feeling cold inside. "Yuh got any reason for suspectin' me, Sheriff?"

"Afraid so." Cooper nodded. Yore hoss is sweaty from bein' rode fast and hard right recent."

The big lawman moved over to Frost's gun-belt that still hung on the back of the chair. He drew out the Colt and examined it.

"This gun has been fired lately," he accused grimly. "Three empty shells still in the cylinder and it is still almost warm."

"Let's see that gun!" young Frost stepped forward and reached for the Colt. "I don't believe yuh, Sheriff! My gun was fully loaded and has been for a week. I haven't used it."

He snatched the .45 out of Cooper's hand, and the next instant the gun was covering the sheriff and Jeff Adams.

"Then yuh're guilty," Sheriff Cooper said sadly. "I been hopin' it wasn't so, Johnny."

"I'm not guilty!" Frost snapped. Moving forward, he took the sheriff's gun out of the holster. "I've been framed—but I can never prove it if yuh put me in jail! I've got to find the man who done this to me! And I will!"

He backed toward the rear door. The guns he held in either hand covered the two men. He had already slapped on his hat, but he brushed it back so it hung down his back, held there by a leather thong around his neck.

Swiftly he stepped out into the small yard between the back of the store and the shed. Then suddenly, as he neared the corner of the shed, a gun roared from around it. Frost leaped back, seeking cover, and without realizing it, it was the stacked-up barrels of dynamite behind which he ducked. Again his foe's gun roared. The bullet hit the metal hoop and a spark flashed.

"That was too close for comfort," muttered Frost.

He fired as he caught sight of a man ducking and weaving at a corner of the shed. His aim was good, for he saw the man jump as though a bullet had hit him. Then the gun in the waddy's left hand roared. The man at whom he aimed stumbled as he ducked back, and Frost was sure the fellow had gone down.

"Got him—I think," he mumbled quietly. "Good thing I did before he blew up this dynamite."

Adams and the sheriff came barging out of the back door of the store. Both had guns in their hands. Johnny Frost sighed and lowered his own guns as he saw them.

"Who yuh shootin' at out here?" demanded Sheriff Cooper. "Yuh sounded right busy."

"I was gunnin' that hombre who killed Bradford and Ward and tried to frame me with their killin'." Frost said, handing his two guns to the lawmen, butts first. "That's why I had to get away for a while."

"Yuh could be bluffin'," the sheriff said slowly. "Yuh just might have stepped out here and started firin' at nothin' so's we'd figger yuh was havin' a gun-fight with somebody."

"I'm gettin' the idea yuh're a right hard man to convince, Sheriff," Adams cut in dryly. "Could be that Johnny has some way of provin' what he's sayin'."

"Yuh said Bradford and Ward was killed and robbed, didn't you, Sheriff?" Frost asked, in a grim tone. "How much money did the killer get?"

"I paid Bradford twenty dollars for the freight he brought me," the storekeeper said. "And he said he'd had a good week and was carryin' over two hundred dollars in his pocket."

"When did that happen?"

FROST stared at a boot that was visible on the ground just around the corner of the shed. Evidently Adams and the sheriff hadn't noticed that boot.

"Did anybody hear you two talkin'?" he added.

"Happened just after Ward knocked you out," Adams said. "Ward heard it yeah, and come to think of it there a strange waddy standin' a little distance away."

"Just what I thought," snapped young Frost. "Follow me!"

He led the way around the corner of the shed. A man was sprawled there on his face—dead. The Cross In A Box waddy turned the body over, and stared down at the face of the stranger who had said his name was Matt Marsh.

"He did it," Frost said, with a shrug. "I figgered there was somethin' wrong about him, the way he kept warnin' me about Bradford and Ward. Why, he even claimed that Bradford grabbed the ax handle out of yore hand and knocked me out with it, Jeff."

"Bradford did no such thing," Adams said indignantly.

"This jasper's name was Matt Marsh," said Frost. "Reckon he stole my hoss and rode out and killed and robbed Bradford and Ward. He must have stole my gun while I was sleeping, too, and put it back." The waddy grinned. "When I sleep I don't fool about it."

"Shore," agreed the sheriff. "And Marsh here just might have thought yuh was gettin' away from the law, so he fired at yuh to try and stop you, Johnny. And then yuh killed him and made up this story."

(Concluded on page 97)

Spunky Smith goes on the warpath for gun sharp Fanner Murdock!

Fanner started running toward the horses, then Spunky shot again

BURY ME NOT ON THE LONE PRAIRIE

By BILL ANSON

DRIVING up from Texas, the Rocking T market herd was a day out of Dodge City when trouble came to a head between young "Spunky" Smith and "Fanner" Murdock, the in-bitten dirty gun-ready wrangler who had been picked up down the Chisholm Trail in an emergency.

"That sorrel bronc in the cavvy is my own personal mount," Spunky had long since told Fanner Murdock. "He ain't to be used by nobody else but me. He gets a grain feeding twice a day. You take good care of him, Fanner, and I'll make it up to you when we reach Dodge and get paid off."

Fanner's lips had curled back over his stained teeth in a cunning grin.

"A good-lookin' hammerhead, cowboy," the new wrangler had admitted. "I see the cayuse has got an SS brand, which is mighty easy changed to an 88 or a Double Circle Cross. How did yuh come by the critter?"

"Bought Redhead from a breeding ranch and branded him to my own registered sign," Spunky had replied, his brown eyes narrow-

ing. "I got other hidden signs on that sorrel pony, too, so anybody what steals him is putting his neck in a noose."

"Better not go ridin' yore sorrel cayuse into Dodge until yuh learn to shoot straight and fast, kid." As he said this, Fanner had snickered. "Yuh Texican spriggin's are long on big talk, but yuh got a heap to learn about the north country. Take a look at this—"

Quick as a striking rattler. Fanner's right hand whipped downward to his hip, catching the butt of his gun and swiveling the barrel upwards without drawing the weapon from the holster. His left hand came speeding across his right thigh, palm knocking back the hammer of the .45, from which belched five tongues of thundering flame. Spunky saw a tomato can near the chuck wagon jump and disintegrate into shreds of gleaming tin.

It was the first time Spunky had ever seen a gun-fanner in action, and it scared the living daylights out of him. He was a tall boy with a shock of unruly brown hair, keen brown eyes and a square chin. He had hired on the Rocking T for driving experience after cutting his eyeteeth on several Panhandle spreads.

The outfit liked him and kidded him plenty. Boss Jim Weatherby said privately that Spunky had the makin's of a powerful fine foreman—if he didn't get into trouble before sprouting a man-size mustache.

But nobody in the outfit cottoned to Fanner Murdock. He held himself aloof even at chow, sitting off by himself after wolfing down his grub and studying the crew with a cunning grin. Where he had come from, nobody knew, and nobody asked. He savvied horses plenty, but he was brutal.

Boss Weatherby had to warn him several times to watch his step.

If Fanner could get away with the trick, he didn't water a mount when a rider came in for a change. Instead of roping the necks of the animals when he went out to pick up a grazing cayuse, Fanner snared the front legs and threw the horse to earth hard, then fastened a picket halter without any trouble, sitting on the bronc's head while it was down. That didn't save the animal's zip for trail-driving work.

AS FOR Spunky's private mount, Fanner took especial good care of the sorrel. Too good! Several times Spunky rode in on a range bronc to find the snaggle-toothed wrangler combing out the sorrel's mane and talking to the horse in a low tone. And Spunky began to fear.

On the last day out of Dodge City, Spunky rode a working bronc out unexpectedly from the dust of the drags and found Fanner Murdock riding along behind the cavvy on the sorrel. A sizzling rage swept the Panhandle waddy. He galloped up to Fanner, shouting his ire.

"Get off my sorrel, Fanner. I told you nobody was to ride Redhead except me. What the devil do you mean by forking a private mount?"

Fanner halted, swinging his body so that the deadly gun on his hip was in full view of Spunky Smith.

"I just figured to give the hammerhead a little exercise, kid," Fanner snarled. "Yuh ain't been ridin' him enough The critter is gettin' too fat on my fine feedin's."

"Get down from that saddle!" Spunky snapped. "And stay down. And what's more, you don't scare me with that half-breed holster and lashed-back trigger. From now on, I'm tendin' to Redhead myself."

Fanner's eyes glittered with hatred. But he swung down from the sorrel's leather hull, his fingers flexing, his lips curled back over his teeth. A shooting now meant that Fanner would have to vamoose plenty fast. He'd lose his wager, and there was little doubt but that the law from Dodge City would take his trail. So Fanner stood silent as Spunky Smith got down from the trail bronc, walked over and swung aboard Redhead.

Spunky rode back to work on his own sorrel pony. He was as cold as death. He knew he didn't stand a chance against Fanner Murdock in a gun fight. But what he feared most was that something would happen to Redhead. Spunky aimed to start a horse string on his own with the finely bred sorrel. If he could find a few good mares in Dodge, he'd buy them on his trail money and take them back to Texas.

Spunky had ambitions. He wasn't going to work as a common puncher all his life. He wanted to be an owner, and then he could pop the question to a certain blue-eyed girl he knew down in the Panhandle.

Spunky rode Redhead all that long afternoon up the last bite of the Chisholm Trail. And when the market herd was milled and put to bed in a wide draw, through which ran a good clear stream, the Panhandle waddy trotted up to the chuck wagon for the last supper of the drive.

The sun was beginning to drop to the grassy horizon of the prairie. Soon, far to the north, could be seen the faint lights of Dodge City. In the morning, buyers would ride out to look the beef herd over and make their bids.

The outfit was in high spirits as the cook ladled out generous portions of stew. In the air was the odor of peach pie, coffee and cake.

"Tomorrer night we'll be eatin' off white plates in regular palaces," Foreman Tom Longstreet hoorawed the cook. "There will be pretty gals in dresses to wait on us. We'll be heavy with gold, hombres," he added, turning to the outfit. "Young Spunky is goin' to see the sights of his life. There'll be dancin' an' music an' faro and fightin' and fergettin' that we got poisoned on slum-gullion and alkali dust all the way from heaven to blazes."

Wild yips greeted the foreman's prediction. The cook's come-back wasn't heard. A dozen punchers yelled at the same time, telling what they planned.

Boss Jim Weatherby howled that he couldn't think to eat with all the commotion going on. He warned every waddy that if any cowdog slipped off in the night to see the sights before it was time, Jim Weatherby would fire the puncher on the spot and take away a fine bonus that Weatherby planned to give each member of the crew.

Spunky's eyes shifted to where Fanner Murdock was sitting off by himself near the picket line and the sleek sorrel that Spunky had tied up near the other cayuses.

Fanner's eyes met Spunky's gaze. Then Fanner looked away.

Spunky got up and led the sorrel down to the creek before darkness set in. There he stood watching the prize cayuse nuzzle water. His heart went out to the animal. He loved Redhead with all his soul. It was a different kind of love than he felt for Jenny Parker, the girl he had left behind him in the Panhandle. Perhaps she might feel a twinge of jealousy, if she knew, but she had no reason. Redhead was so proud and slim and finely built. In that way the sorrel resembled the blue-eyed Jenny. But owning Redhead was like having a child, a big fourteen-year-old kid full of devilment and eagerness.

THEN, as Spunky slowly trailed the bronc back to the picket line, he noted that the hands were bedding down near the campfire. In the shadow of the chuck wagon, Spunky heard voices. One belonged to Boss Jim Weatherby. The other was Fanner's.

"I don't expect no bonus," Fanner was saying in a sneering tone. "Yuh picked me up only two hundred miles down the trail, so yuh can't give me extra what yuh give the other hands. I done my chore, Weatherby, and yuh don't need me no longer. I want my pay now. I'll be ridin' on ter Dodge."

"I'm givin' you a percentage of bonus for that distance you came with us, Fanner," Jim Weatherby replied. "That's fair and square. We could use your work tomorrow. We need it. I don't like to see you quit before the job is completely done."

"Well, I'm quittin' right now," Fanner sneered, his voice dangerous. "I don't want to go into Dodge with the outfit. There ain't nobody here likes me, and I don't give a hoot fer any of them. I aim to pull out right now without no talk."

"You ain't afraid of anybody who might ride out from Dodge to meet us, are you, Fanner?" Weatherby asked coolly.

Fanner flared up. "That's my business! I'll take my wages pronto, and I mean it."

Out near the picket line, Spunky's hand dropped to the butt of his Colt .45. He knew that Jim Weatherby stood no chance in a gun fight with Fanner Murdock. Weatherby very seldom wore a gun. He was all rancher. If he pushed Fanner too hard, the other would murder. There was no doubt about it.

Killer was written all over Fanner Murdock. Weatherby had already riled the gunfanner. It was obvious that Weatherby had called the turn. Fanner was afraid to meet anybody from Dodge City, where Wyatt Earp ruled the roost as a marshal. Perhaps Wyatt Earp had Fanner's brand written down in the Wanted book, and Fanner meant to take no chance.

So Spunky held his breath as he saw the shadow of Boss Jim Weatherby's figure climb inside the chuck wagon. Spunky saw Fanner waiting near the front wheel. Then Weatherby climbed out of the canvas-topped wagon.

"There's your pay, Fanner," Weatherby said. "And I included the percentage of bonus. Good luck to you."

Fanner chuckled harshly.

"I knowed I'd get it," he said. "Save your luck for yourself, Weatherby. Now I can tell yuh that I never worked for such a low-down gang of ignorant, sheep-brained tenderfeet in my hull life. I've had it in my

mind all along to tell yuh a thing or two. And now I'm tellin' yuh to go plumb to blazes."

Fanner walked away as Boss Jim Weatherby stood beside the chuck wagon, his fists clenched, fighting against the rage within him. Fanner's bronc stood off near a clump of greasewood. The killer swung to the saddle of a pinto bronc, threw in his spurs, and roared away into the star drenched night.

Spunky didn't want Jim Weatherby to know that the conversation had been overheard. The Panhandle waddy sneaked toward his blankets and crawled inside. He was smarting with anger for what Fanner had said to good old Jim, who had just stood at death's door and knew it.

That night Spunky Smith slept with his fingers wrapped about the butt of his .45. He didn't sleep soundly. He would awaken every half hour, listening to the night hawk singing far out in the draw near the bedded herd. Spunky would cast a glance at the picket line and try to identify the big form of his sorrel pony sprawled on the earth beside the other broncs. Then Spunky would drop off again for forty winks.

Toward dawn, a bank of clouds drifted across the light of the rising moon. Spunky's dream about the blue-eyed girl in Texas held him for two solid hours. When he awakened with the first streak of dawn, it was with a terrified start. His eyes went to the picket line.

The sorrel was gone!

Spunky came out of his blankets like a jumping jack. His .45 was still in his hand. His mouth opened but he could not cry out. He stumbled madly toward the picket line, searching for Redhead. But the horse had vanished in the night like a ghost.

When Spunky was certain of this, he let out a stream of words that awakened every cowboy in the outfit and brought Jim Weatherby piling out of the chuck wagon.

"The dirty skunk stole him!" Spunky continued. "He came back in the night like a snake. The sorrel knew him and didn't make a sign. Fanner slipped the halter and made off with my Redhead. I'm going to follow him to Canada, if I have to, and kill him."

SUDDENLY Jim Weatherby was beside the trembling boy, who was jerking on his boots and chaps.

"Look here, Spunky," Weatherby counseled. "You'll never find Fanner. You know you won't. Even if you did catch up with him, he would shoot your eyes out. He's dangerous and tricky. He won't go on to Dodge. I need you here, Spunky. Take off that gun belt. Don't be a young fool. I'll make that sorrel bronc good. I'll buy you just as good a horse in Dodge."

"There ain't another cayuse in the hull world like Redhead," Spunky Smith flared back. "Nobody is stoppin' me. I'll catch that thief like I would a sick coyote. He won't get away from me. You can keep my wages, Jim. I'll settle for the best bronc in your cavvy, boss. And I want to borrow your new fifty caliber Spencer rifle. You can't stop me, and you won't."

Jim Weatherby stepped back into the crowd of gaping hands. He sensed that it was useless to argue. Spunky was wild clean through. Perhaps when the boy couldn't pick up Fanner's trail, Spunky would return to Dodge. It might be better to let the kid blow off steam on the prairie.

So Jim handed over his new seven-shot Spencer, and he said nothing when Spunky saddled up a stout, black Rocking T horse, and raced away to the westward, as if hornets were on his trail.

Luckily, the sun had yet to poke its red nose over the eastern crest of prairie. Fanner had stolen the sorrel not an hour or more before Spunky awakened. There had been dark clouds drifting low over the land, and those clouds had brought a thick dew to the tall buffalo grass. That was all in Spunky's favor.

For no rider can hide trail on dew-laden grass. As soon as the sun dries out the natural hay, the grass comes back straight, hiding who had passed in the early hours. Many times a thief does not realize he is leaving a trail for any hombre who takes after him right quick, before the sun yawns and climbs out of bed.

"There she is!" Spunky cried out to himself as he cut across the top of the draw. "There's tracks of two cayuses."

There was Fanner's trail, plain as the nose on your face. He had been riding one bronc and trailing the other, so his speed was cut down a mite. But in addition, Spunky had tuckered out the sorrel the afternoon of the day before. Spunky had suspected crooked work. He had taken the dander out of Redhead so that the animal wouldn't be able to run like a scared deer for very far.

Mounted on the fresh stout-chested Rocking T bronc, Spunky drove in his spurs. He

hadn't but an hour or two of clear trail ahead of him. He rode with his heart in his mouth, vainly searching the distances ahead for sign of his foe. He pushed the black Rocking T animal harder than he had ever pushed a horse in his life. And he knew that once he caught up with Fanner Murdock, then the killer would leave his own pinto bronc and take to the back of Redhead for a final race.

But would Fanner turn and run? The thief had all the courage in the world in his ability to shoot down a raw Texan kid. Fanner might stand and fight. Why would Fanner wear out the prize sorrel in running away? Fanner would first make certain that Spunky was alone, then get ready to lift a scalp with bullet lead.

For a hard hour, Spunky kept the black Rocking T cayuse moving for all it was worth. Behind the rider, the sun glowed like a hot coal in a dawn campfire. Then, the sky turned pink and gold, and, at last, the white light of day was chasing across the prairie and dissolving the ground fog from the deep draws and meadows.

The dew-laden trail ahead of Spunky began to fade out. In another half hour, he would have no sign to follow. He hated himself for pressing the blowing black bronc on. His eyes constantly were on the distances. And then he picked up sight of Fanner Murdock.

Far away, a man on a pinto waited on the top of a hill. There was a second bronc, a sorrel, beside the horseman. The sun was in Fanner Murdock's eyes, so that it was possible he didn't see Spunky Smith's approach.

As Spunky raced on, he watched the glitter of sunlight on the bridle steel of the distant pinto. Fanner turned in the saddle and rode on down behind the tall hill, with the loose sorrel following him. Evidently, the horse thief still couldn't determine if he were being chased. He plainly planned to cross the next low swale of the prairie, then climb the opposite grassy ridge and again search the east for foes. Fanner was taking his time, saving the strength of the sorrel horse for a final get-away on its back.

WHEN Spunky reached the hilltop, his Rocking T horse was almost done-in. The animal didn't have another five miles of fast travel left in it. So Spunky drew Jim Weatherby's fine new repeating Spencer rifle from the saddle scabbard. It was in this rifle that the puncher placed his hope. He was not much of a hand with a .45 six-gun, but he had been born with rifles, and he knew how to use them.

There were seven shots in the butt of the .50 caliber rifle, and there was one on the chamber, making eight fast shots without reloading by thumbing cartridges into the rifle chamber. All he need do was work the lever of the rifle.

As Spunky went over the hilltop, he spied Fanner crossing the middle of the draw a mile away. Down the grade Spunky raced, fearing that the winded Rocking T horse might stumble. The Texican waited for Fanner to look back and see him. But the thief kept on riding toward the bank of a stream, and there Fanner halted to let his pinto and the stolen sorrel drink. That was a mistake, for a cayuse can't sprint after drinking deep. Fanner was evidently filling up the mounts in fear there wouldn't be much water further on. He was giving himself plenty of time to wring the drink out of the animals.

Spunky was within a quarter of a mile of Fanner when the latter started across the stream. But now the horse thief twisted on the pinto and looked back. Spunky saw Fanner stiffen in the saddle. Fanner had seen him despite the fact the sun made the thief's vision difficult.

At once, Fanner threw in his hooks, lashing at his two horses, which floundered in the running water. The thief snatched a rifle from his saddle scabbard as he went up the opposite muddy bank. Fanner was making certain that Spunky was alone.

It was then that Spunky jerked his right toe from the stirrup, drew up his leg and hooked it about the saddle horn. Pushing himself straight upward from the stirrup with his left leg, he raised the Spencer rifle to his shoulder. He had often hunted coyotes down in Texas with a carbine in such style. You had to be good to catch a varmint on the run. You had to shoot fast and hard.

"Here it comes, Fanner!" Spunky growled.

Then he triggered. He had a clear target. He wasn't shooting at his own sorrel pony, which was climbing the bank some distance away from Fanner, who was still riding the pinto pony.

Spunky's shot got away with a snarling bang, smoke lifting from the muzzle of the Spencer rifle.

A howl of rage floated back to Spunky. Fanner had lost his hat. The horse thief came out of the saddle of the pinto as if

jerked by an unseen hand. Fanner whirled, whipping up a rifle to shoot. The weapon flamed. Its bullet went wide of the hard-riding Spunky by ten feet.

Spunky was now within one hundred and fifty yards now. He saw Fanner's riderless pinto trot off toward the sorrel. Fanner started running toward the horses. Then Spunky raised up from the saddle and shot again. At once Fanner took a header into a clump of sage. The two horses ran farther away.

Now Spunky dragged his Rocking T cayuse to a sliding halt. The Texican leaped from the saddle as a second shot from Fanner went over his head. Fanner ducked low.

On his feet, Spunky began moving toward the stream. He couldn't see Fanner behind the clump of sage. Spunky halted, rifle in hand, waiting. He waited while the pinto and the sorrel trotted riderless down the draw toward good grazing.

Then Spunky began moving forward, rifle cocked, watching for sign of Fanner. Perhaps the man had crawled back farther from the sage clump and was holed up behind boulders. Spunky yelled out.

"Come out from hidin', Fanner, yuh sneaking coyote. Your dirty fighting won't help you now. That gun in the half-breed holster with the lashed-back trigger ain't no good now. I don't want to kill a man I don't see, but here goes a bullet into that clump of sage."

Spunky fired, clipping off the top of the sage clump. Immediately, he saw Fanner rear up from behind a patch of tall grass not far to the left of the sage. Fanner charged right down the bank of the stream, dashed into the water in a cloud of spray, and up the near bank. He dived behind a pile of stone. The six-gun with the lashed-back trigger was in Fanner's one hand, a rifle in the other.

A hard grin spread across Spunky's lips. He knew that Fanner was hoping to get close enough to use a six-gun. Fanner obviously didn't know that Spunky had a repeating rifle. The killer thought he was the only man who could shoot fast and hard, spraying his bullet lead like hose water. Spunky didn't have to reload the Spencer by hand at every shot. He just had to work the lever.

So Spunky fired again at the pile of stones. And out from behind the stones came Fanner on the jump, running toward him for all he was worth. This time Spunky pretended to be pushing a new cartridge into his rifle. Fanner dived behind a patch of greasewood.

IMMEDIATELY Spunky threw up his rifle and fired at the greasewoods where Fanner had vanished. As the cowboy quickly levered a fresh cartridge into the rifle chamber, Fanner bounded out of the left side of the greasewoods with a scream of victory.

The deadly six-gun was in Fanner's hand as he came on the charge. The thief was too excited, too flushed with victory, to notice that Spunky wasn't thumbing a cartridge into a one-shot rifle. Fanner must have been thinking that Spunky was too scared even to reload his weapon.

Fanner came on, and his left hand swept across the hammer of the shot gun in his right hand. Fanner was about to spray his shots. He got one bullet away with a crash, but Fanner was running, and his aim was wild.

Spunky stood cool and poised as he shot Fanner Murdock through the chest with Jim Weatherby's fine Spencer repeater.

Fanner seemed to halt his rush in midair. The sunlight glinted on his bared teeth. His eyes were open wide, the pupils rolled back. He curved aside, and went sprawling into a patch of sage, where he rolled over and over, and then lay still in death.

Spunky walked forward, levering a fresh cartridge into the chamber of the long rifle. He stood over Fanner, finally closing his eyes.

"First man I ever killed," Spunky said. "I hope it's the last." He turned and looked off to where his prize sorrel was grazing. Then a shiver took the younger puncher.

"I'll bury Fanner on the lone prairie," Spunky said. "I just have got time to ride into Dodge with the Rocking T boys. There's a fine present to buy for Jenny."

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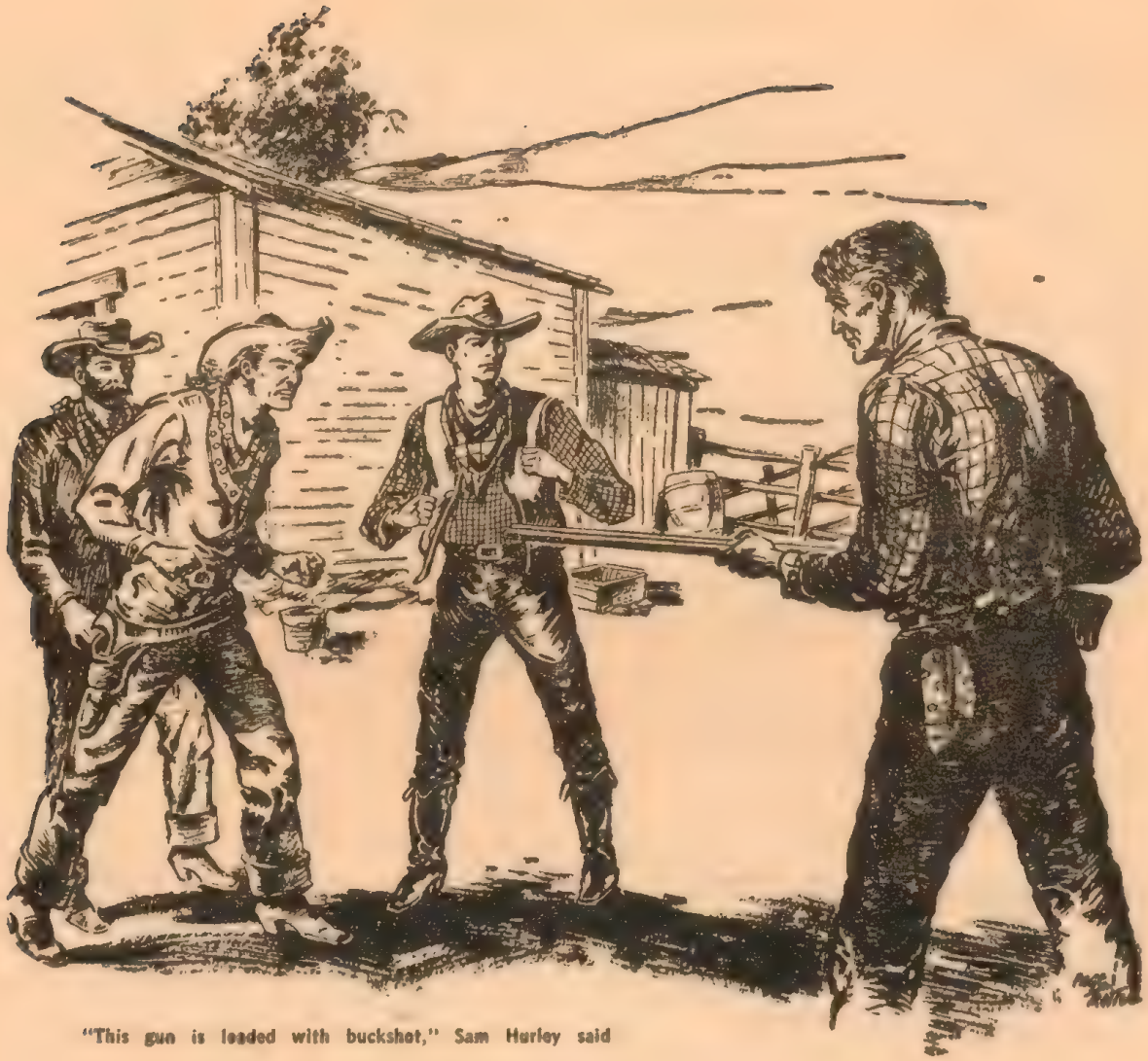
Next Month: THE COTTONWOOD DEPUTY, an Exciting Novelet by T. W. FORD—DON'T SLIP YOUR HOBBLES, an Action Novelet by FRANK MORRIS—and Many Other Punch-Packed Yarns!



"This gun is loaded with buckshot," Sam Hurley said

ALL SIGNS FAIL

By BARRY SCOBEE

Jeff Leeland does his own divining for water—and witches up a blackguard scheme that calls for some swift buckshot!

A LONG level cloud lay black against the sunset. It was the first cloud to appear in the Southwestern ranch-country sky in weeks.

"It looks like one o' these here lead pencils," commented old Sam Hurley. "It's whittled down to a p'int on one end."

"Maybe it's a good sign," said young Jeff Leeland, falling in with the old man's whimsy. "Maybe it will do some writing on the sky about when it's going to rain."

"All signs fail in dry weather," Sam croaked the old saw and sighed. "Anyhow, it's got a fat rubber eraser on t'other end to rub out any writin'."

"It's got to rain," said Jeff, sudden despera-

tion in his tone: "Got to!"

"T'ain't got to do nothin', son," Sam contradicted contrarily. "Only it had better, or my hands will drop clean off."

He regarded his gnarled fingers resting along the top rail of the corral gate.

Jeff inspected his hands, too. They were stiff and cracked, with deep dry sores made by wind and wet while he had been drawing water for weeks with a rope and bucket for his little herd of cattle. Today the level of the water in the well had gone down and down and not risen again from the underground flow. If the same thing happened tomorrow, the cattle would get no water.

"Let's quit thinking about it, Sam," said Jeff. "Let's go in and get some supper."

"I'd as lief not eat as strike a fire and lay out supper," Sam said wearily. "My back's a-achin' from the South Pole to the No'th. Arms is like sticks. Knee j'ints—"

"Cold biscuits left from breakfast, and a pot of beans," said Jeff. "I'll stoop and kindle the stove if you'll slice some salt belly."

"Don't know if I can grip the butcher knife—hey, looky! Comp'ny comin'. Bad sign. If they ain't had supper, I'll shoot 'em."

Two horsemen riding over a nearby hill were dark shapes against the sunset.

Jeff and Sam rested their arms back on the gate and waited, drooping.

"Howdy," one of the strangers spoke out presently. "How are yuh fixed f'r water?"

"Ain't fixed," said Sam. "Ain't got none."

"You're shore drawin' aces then," the man declared. " 'Cause I'm a water witch."

"Don't know about the water," said Sam caustically, "but you sho' look like a witch."

"Sam!" protested Jeff. "Remember your hospitality." And to the newcomers—"You gents are riding late."

"T'ain't never late less it's too late to eat," said the talking stranger. "Name's Moses. I'm called by friends and enemies 'Water Witch' Moses."

He stepped down from his saddle.

"Might as well stay straddle o' your broomstick, witch," old Sam said. "I don't believe in signs and water witchin' and so forth. I was a well-driller till I got religion and repented. Drilled three hundred holes. Witched ever durn one of 'em m'self. Half of 'em had water and half was as dry as our cows is goin' to be tomorrow. It took my faith."

"Maybe you ain't no college-edjucated witcher," Water Witch Moses allowed. "Maybe you don't do it scientific."

HE FUMBLED in the big tarp-covered roll on the pack horse, and drew out a copper-bright rod that was bent V-shape.

"Never did fancy them metal doodlebugs," said Sam. "Me, I perfer fresh-cut stock with sap in the wood. Closer to nature."

"You the owner here?" Moses asked coldly.

"Who? Me?"

"I ain't lookin' at the other feller."

"Nope, I ain't the owner," Sam said. "Jeff is the owner. Me, I ain't nothing but the cook, dishwasher, bed-maker, and woodgitter. Rest o' the time I just rest a-drawin' water."

"Heh-heh, good f'r yuh!" Moses addressed Jeff. "I'll witch yuh a well and g'arantee water fur a hundred smackers."

"If I had a hundred dollars I'd retire," said Jeff. "Why piddle along at a hundred bucks a well, mister? If you can guarantee water, any ranchman in the country will pay you five hundred or a thousand."

"Bull's-eye, first crack, young feller. But I don't hold up my clients. I've witched sixty wells in the last three months and got good water ever time, and charged a hundred smackers. No more. I ain't greedy and grabbin'. You done et supper? Feed us and you can take the price of the grub from the hundred."

Old Sam Hurley helped with the supper, glumly. Now and then, he and Water Witch Moses indulged in a verbal passage-at-arms, like two dogs that can't get along. The other stranger, a dour man with a drooping mustache, spoke only once throughout the evening. That was when Jeff asked him if he required any more beans.

"Don't mind if I do," he said rustily.

They went wearily to bed as soon as the dishes were washed. The strangers settled down under a shed with their own bedrolls. Moses kept up his water talk until the last minute. Jeff lay down in the warm August night wrapped mostly in a hope that maybe—just maybe—there was something to the man's bragging that he had never failed to find water. A fool's hope! Jeff's thoughts hazed out on that hopeful-hopeless note.

After the first two or three hours of deepest sleep, he was wakeful. The crusty sores in the wrinkles of his hands ached like bruises. He heard old Sam tossing and muttering from his aches, too. Then, in the night, Jeff thought he heard the door between the bedroom and the living room gently close. He listened, all ears. Old Sam tossed and

groaned and murmured something about all signs failing. Then Jeff could see a dim light around the cracks of the door.

He eased off the bed, too stiff and sore not to be awkward and make small noises. But a husking little breeze in and around the house covered his sounds. Rather than try turning the knob with his stiff fingers, he squatted and eyed through the keyhole.

In the living room the kerosene table lamp was on the floor, with a scrap of paper thrust against the chimney to dim the light toward the door. Water Witch Moses was kneeling by the lamp and Jeff's small trunk, which was open.

Moses rummaged inside the trunk and brought out Jeff's wallet. It contained only news clippings about ranchmen being on the watch for confidence men and about two or three crimes that had occurred in the county. Moses tossed it back with disgust.

Next, he dragged out Jeff's bundle of private papers—a few old letters and receipts, cancelled checks, and the deed to the little ranch, with mortgage to secure the remainder of the payments.

These two papers Moses read through avidly, apparently getting their contents quickly. With a nod of satisfaction, he replaced them, put down the trunk lid soundlessly, and took up the lamp. In a moment the room was dark. Moses' heavy weight made the porch creak faintly as he left.

Jeff tiptoed to his open window. From it he made out, by sound more than sight in the dark night, Moses going to the shed.

Jeff spraddled through the window. He was barefoot. But the ground was hard-packed and free of sandburs. He slipped toward the shed.

At once he heard Moses saddling a horse. In no time the man was riding off into the black night.

Jeff knew that by the time he could get on his pants and boots, and saddle up, the mysterious stranger would be lost in the darkness.

Jeff found where the two visitors had put down their beds. The one with the mustache was there in snoring sleep.

Jeff returned to his bed, puzzled, trying to make head or tail out of the queer proceedings. He was sore as a kicked wolf, too, at having his private papers investigated. But, perversely now, sleep grabbed him.

The next he knew, dawn was flowing over the landscape like water. Water! The thought brought him back to his problem with a jerk.

JEFF went first to the corral for a look at Water Witch's horse, to see if he could make out anything about the ride in the night. But not his horse nor any of the others showed sign of saddle-blanket sweat to indicate a ride far or fast.

Back at the shed, Moses was just crawling out.

"Get plenty of shut-eye last night?" Jeff asked.

"Didn't open an eye from the time I hit the tarp till right now," said Moses. "How 'bout you, George?"

The other man grunted.

Old Sam Hurley came from the house. He gave Moses a glare. Jeff edged between them.

"Listen, Mr. Leeland," Water Witch Moses said to Jeff, "how 'bout me witching a well for you and takin' six of your steers for pay? I got a soft spot f'r young fellers like you. You say you've got no money. My heart goes out in sympathy. And you shore are goin' to need a well mighty soon, the way them cattle is bawlin' thirsty down at your well yonder."

"Look at 'em, Jeff," said Sam. "Around the well a'ready. Shows they didn't get a full sip yesterday. You cook up breakfast, Jeff. I'll go down and start drawin' water for 'em."

Sam went striding off, the well being no more than a quarter of a mile from the house.

"He's kinda bossy, ain't he?" said Moses. "Telling you what to do."

"We get along," said Jeff. "If you witched me a well, it might be a month or two before I could get a driller here."

"Four or five in the county. You could git one. I don't git no pay till he strikes plenty water. Six steers, picked by me, ain't too much, seein' I'd g'arantee water."

Jeff's hopes bloomed again. What if this windy witch did strike water for him? It might turn out to be pretty important.

"I'll give you four steers to get me a plumb wet well," said Jeff.

"Five."

"Four."

"It's a bet, seein' it's you. Easy way to git four steers, too. Because I never fail. In sixty witchings I ain't failed once. You same as got a rich well right now. I shore like my hot cawffee early."

Throughout the preparation of breakfast, and the eating and drinking of it, Moses kept up his glib talk about never failing. Jeff's hopes went up and down. And he began to wonder a little, too, at the boastful self-confidence.

Moses and the silent George left the house on horseback. Moses had his copper "doodlebug."

"I never unlimber this divining rod," he said, "until I git to the most onlikely places. Up on hills er in mean rocks where most well-drillin' witches never go."

The pair was hardly out of sight when Sam Hurley got back, looking gloomier than Jeff had ever seen him. And excited too.

"Jeff, the well's almost dry. Water's running in a little bit. I ain't been able to jiggle up a whole pail."

Jeff stared at the haggard, loyal face. Jeff's own features went gray under the tan.

All he said was, "Get your breakfast."

He started down the slope.

Sam called after him— "Quart o' coffee is all I'll need."

Before Jeff reached the well, the old man was on his heels. The well was only a roughly blasted hole in the rocks, twelve feet deep. Ordinarily, it stood two-thirds full. Had it been that way now, it would have given the cattle a meager drink, with what might flow in underground during the day. But all that Jeff could see was a spot of brightness little larger than the draw bucket, with only a small glistening trickle flowing in.

"What's happened here anyhow?" he demanded, getting up.

"Yuh reckon them two fellers done something to the well?" Sam questioned in a huge suspicion. "Jiggered the flow some ways? They couldn't have drawed it empty."

"What are those cows bunched down there for?" Jeff asked, pointing at several old high horns sniffing and bawling down in a ditch below them.

Both men went clambering down the rocky slope. The cows gave back. Where they had been, was hoof-marked wet ground. The men followed the moisture for fifty yards.

"Been water runnin' here," said Sam. "Now how'n Sam Hill did it get here?"

They might have missed the explanation had not Sam's sharp old trail eye fallen upon a bootprint in soft earth near the top of the bank, where no human track should have been. Pointing to it, then pushing aside bunch grass and weeds, he found something that made both him and Jeff gape in astonishment.

The something was a big neat coil of rubber hose, strong inch-and-a-quarter tubing, such as might be found around a well-drilling outfit.

"They syphoned our well out," Sam managed to choke. "That durn dirty—whoever done it?"

Jeff told him about Moses rummaging through the trunk and riding away in the darkness, and lying when he said he had slept all night.

"They dreened our well!" Sam cried. "They've put us on the rocks. Every cow animal we've got will perish o' mad, bawlin' thirst. Git my hands on that water witch, I'll—"

"Where did he get the hose?" Jeff cut in.

They went back up to the well on slightly higher ground. They scanned over all the visible country. No well-drilling outfit, no riders, no unusual thing was to be seen anywhere. They climbed higher. After a time they made out Moses and George two miles or so away, atop the rockiest hill on the ranch.

"Witching there for water!" Sam jeered. "Showin' off. I doubt can he witch anyhow with that durn copper contraption."

AS THEY made their way back down to the well, Jeff's thoughts were reaching out in every direction. What were the two men up to, anyhow? Was Moses really trying to find water?

"Can men really locate underground water with a forked stick, or what they call a doodlebug?" he asked Sam suddenly.

"You losin' y'r wits, Jeff?" Sam growled, as if outraged. "You heard me say last night I'd drilled three hundred wells by witchin'. Think I was lyin'?"

"How?"

"Don't ask me no how's. I don't know. Don't nobody know. We jist know the stick twists down when you git over water. Didn't you never see it?"

"Reckon I didn't," Jeff admitted.

The old man went off a few steps to a clump of Mexican buckeye and cut out a forked stick. Trimming it neatly he held the prongs, one in each hand, and pointed the main stem away from him.

"That's the way you hold it," he said. "Take it. Clutch the prongs tight. That's it. Now walk over to the well."

Feeling a little foolish, but holding the divining rod steadily in front of him, Jeff walked to the well. As he came abreast, the whole forked stick twitched and bent downward.

"I think I caused it to do that with my gripped hands," said Jeff.

"Huh," Sam scoffed.

Jeff went down into the ditch to the moist ground.

"Don't know if it'll work there," Sam called.

But again Jeff seemed to feel a twitching in the fork, yet not so pronounced. He tried it again at the well. Still he was not certain that the tugging on the stick was not caused by his tense gripping. He tossed the fork aside.

"We've got to draw what water we can for these cattle," he said.

It was a dreary, hopeless task, dipping up the accumulated water. The day was growing hot. The thirsty animals bawled and crowded at the trough. The pair carried water out to poorer, less combative cows, one taking the bucket, the other keeping the shoving beasts from trampling him.

They kept watching the higher country for Water Witch Moses and the other man, catching a glimpse of them only now and then. Jeff's thoughts kept tugging at the situation.

"Sam," he said while they waited for the bucket to fill, "I've been here four years. You've been around these parts twenty years."

"Thutty," said Sam.

"Who owned this ranch before I did?"

"Nobuddy but that big corp'ration. They leased out their holdings in small dabs of ten, fifteen, and twenty square-mile patches. Even leased fifty sections to some. A feller, I don't know his name, had this twelve sections o' yourn."

"Wasn't anybody living here when I came to look at the place," said Jeff. "They told me at the corporation's office that nobody was on it or trying to buy it. So I made my down payment."

"Yup. That snickerbill who owns the BL outfit, when I was drilling a well for him, told me the feller leasin' here wanted to buy, but he didn't have the coinage f'r the down payment. He was tryin' to git the price down er something."

"Maybe this Moses or George was the leaseholder and is back now pulling some shenanigan."

"Yeh. Maybe not. Who knows? The durn treacherous whelps! I'm surprised a water witch would be up to sich stuff."

"Sam," Jeff got back to a question that had been at the back of his mind, "if water can be witched with sticks and rods, why are wells so hard to get?"

[*Turn page*]

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'Hah, that's the joker in the deck. Ain't no question about a divinin' rod dippin' down to water. But they ain't got no jedgment. They'll dip for a gushin' underground river just as easy as they do for a little moisture. I've had strong indications and drilled three hundred feet down and hit nothing but a little wet earth."

Toward noon, discouraged after seeing ahead of them nothing but stark ruin, Jeff and Sam left the bawling cattle and walked back to the house. As they arrived, Water Witch Moses and the man George came in on their horses. It struck Jeff that the pair had been waiting just out of sight.

Water Witch Moses came up, shaking his head dolefully from side to side.

"I've covered every dang foot o' the most onlikely and also the likely parts of yer ranch," he said mournfully. "Fust time I ever failed to git a indication. My reputation is hurt. And my feelin's." He sighed. "Well, they say all signs fail in dry weather. Looks like my scientific, college, divining rod has failed. Reckon all there is left to do is eat dinner."

"Put up your horses," said Jeff.

"Hey," said Sam, as soon as the men were out of hearing, "I rekernize all to once that dad-blasted tight-mouth George feller. He's a notary public over to the courthouse in Shindig. I'll bet my hoss he ain't up to no good."

Jeff was starting a fire in the cookstove when Water Witch Moses appeared at the kitchen door.

"Yuh got some more comp'ny comin'," he said. "I shore hope he ain't too hearty a grub-grabber, seein' you're kinda short on vittles."

THE lone man riding up was a big, whiskered individual in range hat, boots, and town clothes.

"My name's Tom Ledley," he said, and shook hands all around. "There are numerous smaller ranchmen up against it in this extended drouth. I have a downright horror of seeing hard-working men go broke. Been broke twice myself, and it isn't agreeable. I've been buying up a few small ranches to help out in this calamitous drouth. It's all I can do to pay for my ticket in this hard world. How are you fixed for water, Mr. Jeff?"

"I have enough for dinner coffee here in the house well," said Jeff, trying to be lightly humorous, but showing dismay.

"Ah," breathed the whiskered visitor. "I sense that you are in desperate circumstances, indeed. I see your cattle milling down there and hear them bawling. Are you in a position to drill for water at once?"

"Wouldn't know where to drill," said Jeff.

"Have you had your land witched?"

Jeff nodded to Moses. "He's been busy this forenoon."

"Me, I'm Water Witch Moses," the diviner spoke up. "I've given his ranch a good goin' over with my scientific divining rod. Didn't git a single nibble."

"Ah, so you are the famous water witch who never fails!" exclaimed Tom Ledley. "Moses *always* finds water! But now you've failed! Don't be discouraged, my dear sir. All signs fail now and then." Ledley turned to Jeff. "Your situation is indeed gloomy. Have you no way out at all?"

"Reckon not," said Jeff.

"Umm." Mr. Ledley gazed off into the distance and spoke as if to himself. "I have bought two ranches within distance from here, where cattle could be moved in time." He turned back to Jeff. "Have you thought of selling out to save what you can?"

"Well—"

"Do you care to name a price for your outfit—land, stock and barrel?"

"I'll have to think about it," Jeff said doubtfully.

"I would be willing to pay you about what you have invested. Of course, there would be some loss of cattle. If the celebrated Water Witch Moses has failed to divine an underground stream, it means there isn't any. Further, it means this would always be a wet-season ranch, practically useless in protracted drouths. I don't wish to hurry you, Jeff. I never push a man. Take your time through the dinner hour to consider what your best interests are. I have considerable territory to cover. I shall be leaving when I have eaten, and my horse has had some water and grain. I recognize that gentleman over there as George Leadmyer, the notary public at Shindig. No doubt he could notarize any papers that might have to be signed."

"Sam," said Jeff, "if you'll start dinner, I'll go look after Mr. Ledley's horse."

Jeff put out some of his scarce grain for the visitor's animal. Then he saddled one of his own horses out of sight behind the shed.

Still keeping out of sight, he rode swiftly down to the well where his herd stood in the burning August sun, bawling for water.

There, he reached down from the saddle and picked up the forked stick he had tossed away.

Across the pleasantly rolling hills and then up to higher, rocky ground, Jeff hurried his bay. His thoughts were not pleasant. They dwelt upon his guests in general, but mostly upon the unctuous and hypocritical gabble of the ranch buyer.

"Must be that I look like a dunce," Jeff commented. "Thinking he could fool me with oily talk. Water Witch Moses! Dug into my papers and found out how much I paid and how much I owe on this ranch. Brought a notary along. Failed to witch water! Had the deck stacked for his lawyer to show up when they figured I'd be discouraged and sunk. Buy me out, will they, at a reasonable price!"

Well, maybe they would at that, he thought further. Moses might know there was water on the land somewhere.

"Probably he's the man that had it leased and wanted to buy and couldn't. But I've got to find that water or lose my cattle and go broke, or sell out to them and save a little."

He topped out on the highest ground and the rockiest patch, where he had seen Moses and the other man wandering around.

There he began to walk about with the

[*Turn page*]

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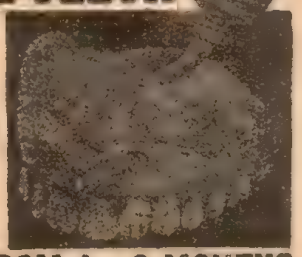

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forked stick gripped tightly in front of him Back and forth, here and there. He got no response at all. He felt silly and foolish about it.

Jeff went down the slope a short way to the very roughest spot. Because he could see the whole area of barren rock from horseback, he had never taken time to get down and walk into it in the four years he had been on this land.

Now, for the first time, his boots were making contact.

Once more he gripped the two branches of the fork and pointed the stem ahead. And suddenly it seemed to twist and tug.

He gave back, startled. Surely his own gripping hands had not caused that movement. He tried it again. At the same spot, he did, for a fact, feel the fork jerk. He took another step forward. The green wood fairly yanked downward, as if pulled by a mighty attraction. He took another step, and one of the fork's branches snapped in two in his hand. The other end dangled and teetered.

Jeff stood there dumfounded. He scanned his eyes around, far and near. Not a moving thing was in sight in all the still, hot land. The only sound was the rocks ticking minutely in the heat. Then his ears caught the sound of running water.

Good lord, was he going daffy fooling with this witching business! Was he hearing water when there was no water to hear? No, by gracious! There *was* a sound of water!

He dropped the broken stick and got down and put an ear to the burning hot earth. Running water, no doubt of it!

He raised up and looked at the rocks. Just before him was a flat stone of the size of a washtub, roughly two or three inches thick. It looked as if it might have been laid there. He got to his feet, bent, hooked his fingers under the edge of the slab and heaved.

The rock came up and dropped aside. At Jeff's feet was a hole big enough for a man to drop into. He knelt, peered down, and listened. Gradually in the sunlit rocky depths, eight or ten feet below, he saw a rushing stream of water.

Once before in his boyhood in the ranch country, Jeff had seen just such a sight. He forgot the witching angle. His thought went extremely practically, though he was a bit awed.

"It will increase the value of my land three or four times over," he said. "And give those poor thirsting beasts down there a drink!"

WHEN Jeff rode up to his ranchhouse, the lawyer—if he was a lawyer—and Water Witch Moses and the notary public were waiting for him outside the door.

Jeff could hear old Sam in the kitchen.

"Well, well," said Ledley, "we didn't know what had become of you. But I waited nevertheless, hoping to see you through."

"I found the water," said Jeff.

There was utter silence for a moment. Their staring eyes were incredulous. Then Moses exploded.

"You found the water! Why, you dirty, double-crossin', trick-playin', spyin' four-legged—yuh followed me, yuh seen me up there!"

There was a step at the kitchen door. Old Sam Hurley appeared with a double-barrel shotgun in his hands. He clicked the hammers back.

"Loaded with buckshot," Sam said softly.

Tom Ledley cleared his throat. "Moses, as your attorney-at-law," he said, "my advice is to retire gracefully. Even to get out of the country, and get fast. You will recall that I told you that this was a very tricky game to attempt. Fortunately, you paid me in advance. Let's express our thanks for generous hospitality and depart."

"Yeh, quick," said old Sam.

"You needn't pay for the hospitality," said Jeff. "I'll just keep that nice long hose and syphon water out of the new find for my cattle this afternoon."

"Mr. Jeff," said the lawyer, "I hope I am not such a complete scoundrel as to depart without informing you that three or four miles below here is a well-driller with his outfit. I spent the night with him. It was my client's idea. He wanted to get a well started as soon as you signed the deed. I have no doubt you can employ the said driller without delay, if so be your inclination."

"Git goin'!" old Sam ordered. "We got to git our cattle to water."

"Right," said Jeff. "Before any more signs and witches fail."

●

Next Month's Novel: THE DESERT MYSTERY, by BRADFORD SCOTT
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THE HITCHING RAIL

(Continued from page 6)

recklessly, drownin' his memories in drink, and seemin' to have no purpose left in life. Yet he was a impressive lookin' figure, like one born to better things.

And they said o' John Ringo that if ever there was such a thing as a honorable outlaw, it was he.

Once he had give a fellow his word he kept it to the letter, come hell or high water. And to John Ringo, outlaw, all womankind was worthy o' respect. It made no difference whether she was irreproachable or not, he treated 'em all with utmost respect, and any hombre makin' a disparagin' remark about any woman in his presence had to eat his words or fight.

They usually took it all back right pronto, too, for Ringo was one o' the fastest gunmen in the old West.

Good and Bad Ancestors

He was born down Texas way, the son o' parents o' some standin' and refinement, though he had good and bad ancestors.

He was a grandson o' Colonel Coleman Younger with whom his three sisters lived in San Jose, California, and there was other members o' the tribe with honorable and distinguished reputations. But it's said he inherited his strain o' outlaw-gunman from his kin, the famous "Younger" brothers o' Missouri. They were guerillas under the black flag o' the bloody Quantrill, and rode with the bank robbers, Frank and Jesse James.

The Younger family was a big one, and it represented the best and the worst o' human kind.

John Ringo's only brother was killed in a feud in Texas when John was only a boy. He set out to hunt down the murderers, killed all three o' them, then left the state and become a wanderer about the frontier West. He lived by his wits and his six shooter from that time on, bein' adept at cards and hold-ups.

Joined Curly Bill's Band

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Curly Bill, John Ringo, and the rest o' the cut-throat band o' robbers killed the Mexi-

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cans, like slaughterin' so many coyotes, and took the loot, without a prick o' conscience.

But if a man was a friend o' John Ringo—ah, that was a horse of another color. He would go the limit for anyone who had ever befriended him, riskin' his life with all the recklessness of a man who put no value on livin', as was true, in his case.

No Fear of Death

Once when the famous Earp brothers and Doc Holliday o' Tombstone, Arizona set out toward the near-by, small town o' Charleston to arrest Curly Bill, if they had the luck to catch him, John Ringo held 'em up at a bridge, and, single handed, turned 'em back.

Ringo was willin' to die for the pleasure o' takin' an Earp or two, or Doc Holliday, as the case might be, with him. He hated them, and was forever trying to pick a quarrel with them, singly, or in a pack. John Ringo feared death not at all.

The incident at the bridge come about in this way:

Wyatt and Virgil Earp, with Doc Holliday, learned that Curly Bill, who had just robbed a stage, was in Charleston. They figured he was probably drunk on the loot of the hold-up and, thinkin' John Ringo in jail in Tombstone, they decided takin' Curly Bill, who was probably dead drunk, ought to be easy.

What they didn't know was that Ringo had been released from jail by Sheriff Behan and Deputy Billy Breakenridge, on the word of Ringo's lawyer that his bail was good. Ringo heard, somehow, o' the proposed sally against Curly Bill by the Earps, and he skun out ahead o' them.

A Plumb Warm Welcome!

When the Earp brothers and Doc Holliday approached the bridge acrost the San Pedro they come to an abrupt halt. John Ringo stood at the far end o' the bridge, facin' the horsemen, holdin' his rifle at the "ready" his eyes gleamin' with eagerness for the fight he expected.

"Come on across, boys!" he called. "Got a warm welcome for you!"

The Earp trio conferred together and, though bold and fearless men theirselves, they decided it looked too much like suicide to go any farther. It was Curly Bill they were tryin' to get, not John Ringo. Wisely, they turned their horses and rode back to Tombstone.

But there was an aftermath. Next day it was found that John Ringo's bail was bein' denied, not approved. The district attorney had declined to approve the bond offered. And was the sheriff's face red? He had al-

ready let Ringo go free, thinkin' the bail would be granted.

The judge declared he would hold Sheriff Behan and Deputy Billy Breakenridge responsible—which meant they'd both lose their jobs. They were at fault, and had to admit it.

A Heroic Surrender

In court the next day the judge delivered a scathin' rebuke, his brow like a thundercloud. He hadn't finished when he was interrupted by the entry of a lean, dark man with somber eyes.

He stalked forward, and the court lost all semblance o' order amid wild cheers. It was John Ringo, come to give hisself up because his leavin' had got two men into trouble, and they had befriended him.

He beat the case and didn't die until some time later. It has never been known just how he was killed. He was found near the mouth o' Morse Canyon in a lonely spot. His gun lay beside him, and one shell had been exploded. There was a bullet hole in his head.

It was generally believed that he killed hisself, though there's some who claim a man o' Tombstone, name o' Frank Leslie, shot him.

They buried him right there, under a great oak, and piled rocks high on his grave. I've seen it—a mass o' rocks in a tangle o' weeds, a long way from any habitation. [*Turn page*]

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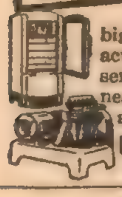

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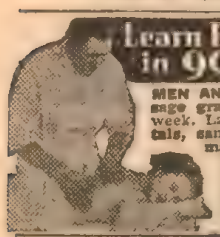

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OUR NEXT ISSUE

HERE is a sight that could occur only in our great and glorious Western country—a sight wild enough to make a tenderfoot's hair stand on end.

Up in the afternoon sky, Walt Slade saw a horseman galloping along. There was no earth under the bronc's hoofs. It was not a fabled winged cayuse, nor was the rider an aviator. The horseman was bent over the saddle pummel, looking back over his shoulder in terror.

Then, far behind him and up there in the sky, appeared other riders—a full half dozen horsebackers, using quirt and spurs. And suddenly they began shooting at the fugitive rider. There was no sound of exploding powder or drum of hoofs. There was just the picture of the chase up there in the sky, and it made an hombre wonder if he were seeing things that didn't exist.

But Walt Slade, whom the peons along the Mexican Border called *El Halcon*—The Hawk—was witnessing a real tragedy. Perhaps you have guessed the answer. The sky picture was a mirage. Because of the heat waves rising in the desert and acting like a mirror in the sky, the horsemen were reflected from the earth. Though they appeared not far from Walt Slade, they were really too far away on the earth for him to stop what happened.

Bradford Scott, author of this powerful novel entitled THE DESERT MYSTERY, in the next issue of THRILLING WESTERN, describes the tragedy as follows:

Rigid with suspense, his nails biting into his sweating palms, *El Halcon* watched the silent drama unfolding in the golden air. He saw the fleeing horseman throw up his arms, reel from his saddle and fall into limitless space. And, as if his fall had snapped the cords that held in place the reflecting sky screen, the whole scene vanished and only the limitless expanse of sun-drenched blue remained.

Slade's tense muscles relaxed, leaving him quivering as from mighty physical effort. His eyes were coldly gray, his face bleak. For *El Halcon* knew that what he had just witnessed was no figment of overwrought imagination, no fantasy of sun and air and shifting winds.

Somewhere over there beyond the edge of the world, beating the sands with their horses' hoofs, rode fleshly counterparts of the ghostly horsemen who had slain a fleeing shadow with a shadowy bullet.

Down there on the sands the fugitive had been a living, breathing man. The bullet that struck him down was sound and solid. The desert rocks had reverberated to the roar of guns. Those whitish puffs had wreathed and drifted in the hot air.

Even now, doubtless, the slayers were grouped about the body of their victim.

With this unique opening, THE DESERT MYSTERY plunges into one of the fastest action stories ever to appear in THRILLING

WESTERN. It is a tale of a lost valley in a weird country of sand and rock—a powder-exploding plot about rustlers and punchers, filled with fight and the kind of men who built a civilization out of a savage land.

THE DESERT MYSTERY is not only an adventure story about under-cover Texas Ranger Walt Slade, but a magnificent revelation of the wonders of the land that has no equal anywhere in the world—a great range of promise, miraculous happenings, strange mountain ranges hiding amazing minerals beneath their ridges, breath-taking scenery and puzzling twists of nature.

Again *El Halcon* is confronted by a range mystery that calls for quick thinking and gunsmoke. Following the murder clue given him in the mirage, he rides into a desert town torn by feud and outlawry, and there Walt Slade finds Death waiting for him.

THE DESERT MYSTERY is a short novel for the reader who likes his fiction dealt out straight and fast. And in the same fistfull of stories in the next issue of THRILLING WESTERN will be found a novelet by T. W. Ford that starts off like a bullet and doesn't stop until it smashes the target.

[*Turn page*]

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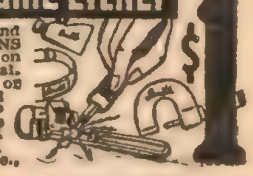

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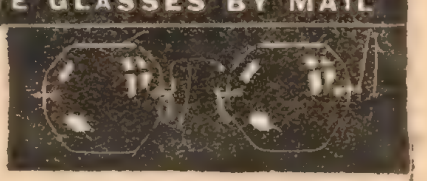

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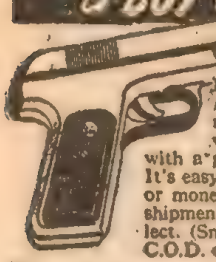

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Here are the very first paragraphs of THE COTTONWOOD DEPUTY:

Den Dacey was close to the kill.

"Bull" Joe Collis was wounded, traveling slower. And on top of that, the fugitive didn't know he was being followed, had no idea a John Law was pushing hard on his coat tails. To cap it all, Deputy "Little Ben" Dacey had learned Collis planned to hole up somewhere close to Medicine Hill.

Little Ben stretched his six-foot whalebone frame in the saddle of the claybank, rising in the stirrups momentarily. In a matter of a few hours he should be jumping his man, walking in on his hideout and shoving a Colt muzzle under Bull's hooked nose when the fugitive least expected it.

That was what Deputy Ben Dacey thought. But Fate had a trick up her sleeve. The lawman suddenly found himself not hunting a man, but being hunted by lynch mob and sheriff.

He has no time to explain. The human wolf pack flushes him before he can make a plan. Deputy Dacey is put to flight in a breathless tale of swift happenings, perilous escapes and amazing surprises!

Another novelet, DON'T SLIP YOUR HOBBLES, by Frank Morris, is featured in the next issue of THRILLING WESTERN, a gripping character story about a Western drummer who walks into a holdup and finds himself at the wrong end of a six-gun. This happens at the livery, where coffee salesman Dave Bryson goes for his team, and here is the scene:

"Stand hitched, dude," a voice spoke in the shadows of a stall.

There stood a big barrel-chested hombre. Bryson's alert gaze swiveled from the stranger's huge hands to the dead livery owner at his feet. Bryson's tongue thickened against the roof of his mouth. It wouldn't move. He couldn't find the air to form the words crowding his taut throat.

"Just lift them purty white paws, dude, an' groundrein them fancy yeller shoes, or I'll blow you apart."

Dave Bryson took a backward step, felt his shoulders touch the stall partition. His hands came up slowly. He wasn't armed. Never carried a gun. Wouldn't have done him any good now, anyway. This big ape had killed the hostler. At least, he had the physical strength to have done it. Bryson could hardly pull his eyes from those big hairy hands.

The big man moved in close. His great hands patted over Bryson's pockets. His chuckle was an ugly sound.

"You an' me got business," the gunman growled. Then he lifted his long face, his little eyes peering over Bryson's shoulder. "This the feller, Chet?" he called.

Bryson heard the soft fall of boots, the clink of spurs. It was loud now and he twisted his head. It was the tough-looking little man in puncher clothes who had been tailing him all forenoon, while Bryson

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made his rounds of Blackwing's stores and eating houses on his coffee-selling route.

"That's him, Moose," the pale-eyed little puncher said. "Tagged him all mornin'. Found out from the Chinese eatin' house, where he took an order for coffee, that he's leavin' town directly."

Dave Bryson thereupon discovers that he must travel with two unwanted passengers in his tarp-covered wagon. And the coffee salesman starts a spine-chilling trip down the road of peril.

It will be a bonanza number, pards, with a big assortment of thundering fine short stories and features, including the Hitching Rail department. Don't miss the next issue of THRILLING WESTERN. It's the magazine to take on your vacation trip this summer.

LETTERS FROM READERS

YOU can just bet your boots that all the letters brought into our office aren't written by tenderfeet. We have some sharp-eyed correspondents who seem to be sitting on the edges of their chairs, waiting—almost hoping—to catch our Western writers in a slip.

Of course, our fictioneers are human beings, just like the readers, and they can be expected to get into a technical argument now and then. Here are two letters that landed Bradford Scott, author of the *El Halcon* stories, in a nice kettle of fish.

I have always understood that the West produced some mighty men. But in FEUD IN STAR DRIVE VALLEY is the first time that I ever suspected that men would sink in mercury.

If the author's lake in the story proves to have

[*Turn page*]

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mercury at the bottom, it would be worth a fortune. Perhaps after fifty or a hundred feet, it might be water the rest of the way. Have they investigated it yet?—*W. R. Martin, Marianna, Pa.*

Please tell Bradford Scott that he must be more careful of his facts, or some of his old readers might get real mad. In FEUD AT STAR DRIVE VALLEY he mentions a lake of mercury. A man's body will not sink in a pool of mercury. Even a stone will float.

Also, a sidewinder is not a large rattlesnake and seldom gives warning, especially to a man on horseback.

I like the Walt Slade stories, but Mr. Scott should be more careful of his facts.—*R. T. Jenney, Ojai, California.*

Here is the way Bradford Scott explains his slip, and he admits it was a slip. When he wrote the scene in which Walt Slade hurled his foe into the crater of mercury, the man vanished beneath the surface of the mercury. Mr. Scott's mistake was in not having the body appear again on the surface. The body would have sunk in the mercury out of sight, then been thrust to the surface. So Mr. Jenney certainly knew what he was talking about, and we take our hat off to him.

But Mr. Martin is mistaken in believing the mercury will float on water. It is just the other way around. And Mr. Scott's "lake" was an old crater in which big pools of mercury have been found. But we think that Mr. Martin deserves a courtesy bow for watching *El Halcon's* adventures keenly.

We hope he continues, just as we hope our other readers will keep an eye peeled on the authors of THRILLING WESTERN. As for a sidewinder being a rattlesnake, we will have to rely on our dictionary, which sure enough says it is a rattlesnake. Mr. Scott is positive that it does rattle before striking. What have the rest of you Western hombres got to say about it?

Now that we have stoked up that old argument again, we can turn to a few more peaceful letters, like the following:

You may be surprised to hear from a woman reader, but I like Western stories better than others, and THRILLING WESTERN is tops.

But could you find room for one poem? I love reading, but I am a poem collector, too, and as a Western fan, I like Western poems.—*Ruth Pankey, Helena, Arkansas.*

THRILLING WESTERN is just the best magazine published, and I think that *El Halcon* is the best reading in the book.—*Charles Dangerfield, Baltimore, Md.*

I sure did like THE RANGE TERROR by Bradford Scott. It was the best *El Halcon* of the many I have read. Keep them coming.—*Edward Sully, Omaha, Neb.*

My family is still laughing over DOWN TO BEANS, by Syl MacDowell. Swap and Whopper are our favorite characters, and we read the stories out loud. My husband thinks it is good training for the children, and we have a fine time every time we buy THRILLING WESTERN.—*Edna Hope, Shelby, Mont.*

Well, that will be all for this time, partners. Don't forget to let us know just how you

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want THRILLING WESTERN written, and let us know when something doesn't strike your fancy. There's always space for a good letter of criticism. We'll start searching around for some good poetry just in case some letter writer seconds Miss Pankey's motion.

Here's luck to one and all! And thanks for all your splendid letters. We'll print excerpts from many more of them in the issues to come. Please address all letters and postcards to The Editor, THRILLING WESTERN, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.

Be seeing you!

—THE EDITOR.

A HARD MAN TO CONVINCE

(Concluded from page 74)

"Yuh might try searchin' his body," Frost said dryly. "Mebbe the money this Marsh hombre stole is still on him."

The big lawman, sticking the extra guns in his belt, knelt down and searched the corpse. He drew a roll of bills out of a pocket of Marsh's levis, counted it, and found over two hundred dollars in the roll. Adams identified a ten-dollar bill with figures scribbled on it as one he had given Bradford.

"Looks like yuh been tellin' it straight, Johnny," the sheriff said, as he glanced up.

Johnny Frost breathed a sigh of relief. Then he looked at the owner of the general store and grinned.

"Like you said, Jeff," he muttered, "the sheriff shore is a hard man to convince!"

Answers to Questions on Page 53

1. John Colter, a member of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, who remained to settle in the West.
2. No. Conflict began only after available rangeland grew limited and the market for sheepmen's products widened.
3. Colonel William F. Cody (Buffalo Bill). "Pahaska" meant "long hair."
4. No. It is a distinct species found only in North America.
5. Montana, the third largest Western state.

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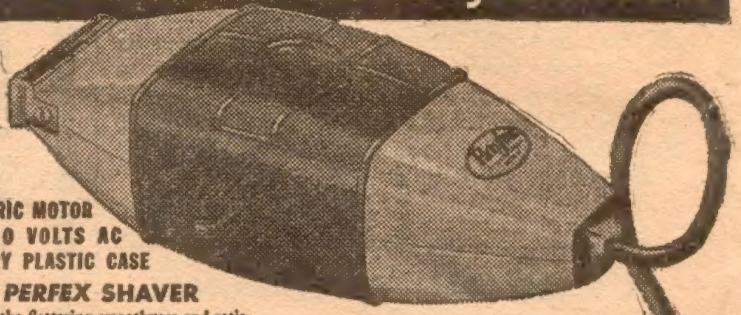

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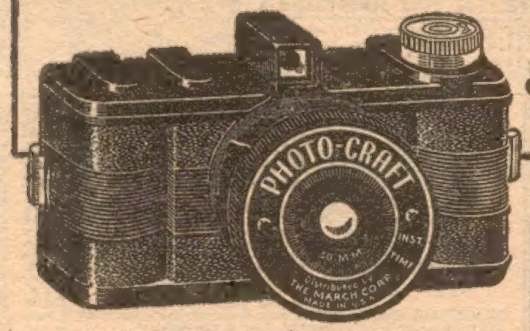

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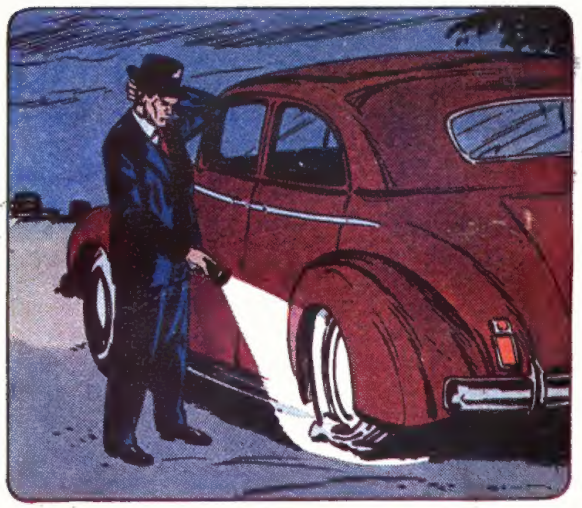
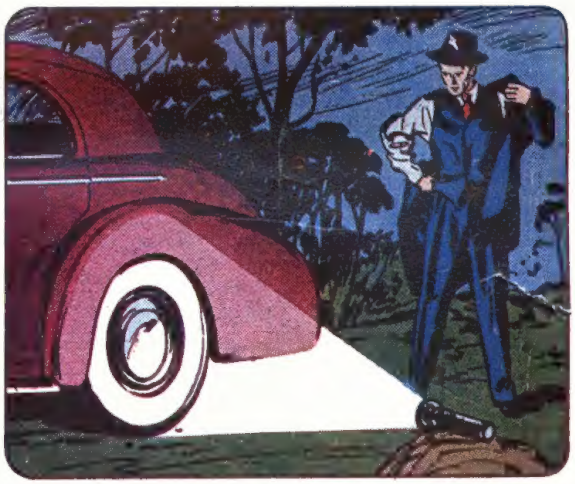


1 Most any motorist can change a tire. But few can change it at night with top speed, efficiency — and *safety!* Night tire-changing can be hazardous — but "Eveready" flashlights can reduce the danger. First principle, says the American Automobile Assn., is...

2 Park *off* the highway. Next best place is on a *straight* stretch of road. If you must park on a curve, a light should be set on the road some distance back. Be sure neither you nor a bystander blocks off the view of your tail-light!



3 Keep all your tire-changing tools tied or boxed *together,* where you can pick them up without searching or fumbling. Remove your spare before jacking up car — tugging might push car off jack. If alone, set flashlight on a stone in convenient position.

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